

Number 1 • Summer 1990

80 PAGES
SUGGESTED
FOR MATURE
READERS



MS. TREE
\$3.95 USA
\$4.95 CAN

MS. TREE

QUARTERLY

A COMPLETE Ms. Tree Thriller
by MAX ALLAN COLLINS
and TERRY BEATTY



PLUS:

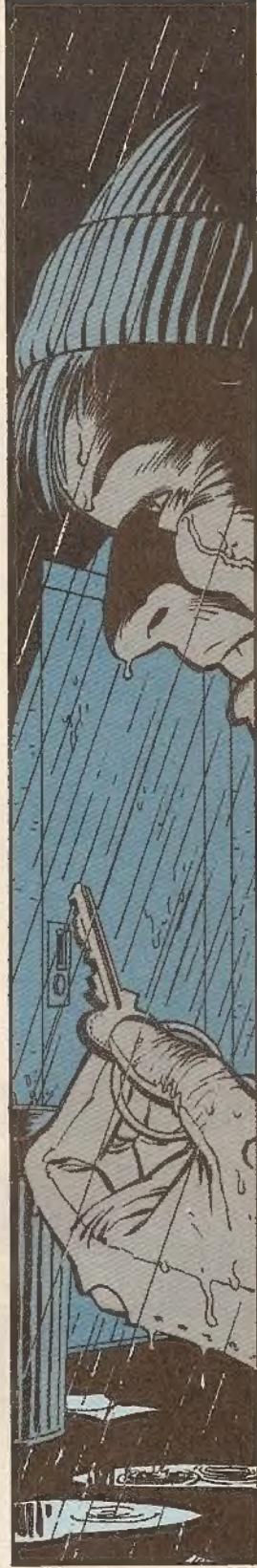
MIDNIGHT
by Edward Gorman
and Graham Nolan

BATMAN
by Dennis O'Neil
and Mike Grell

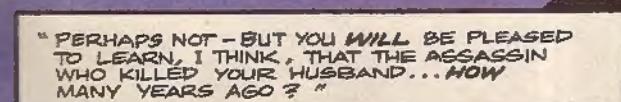
I WAS SLEEPING.



I WAS DREAMING.









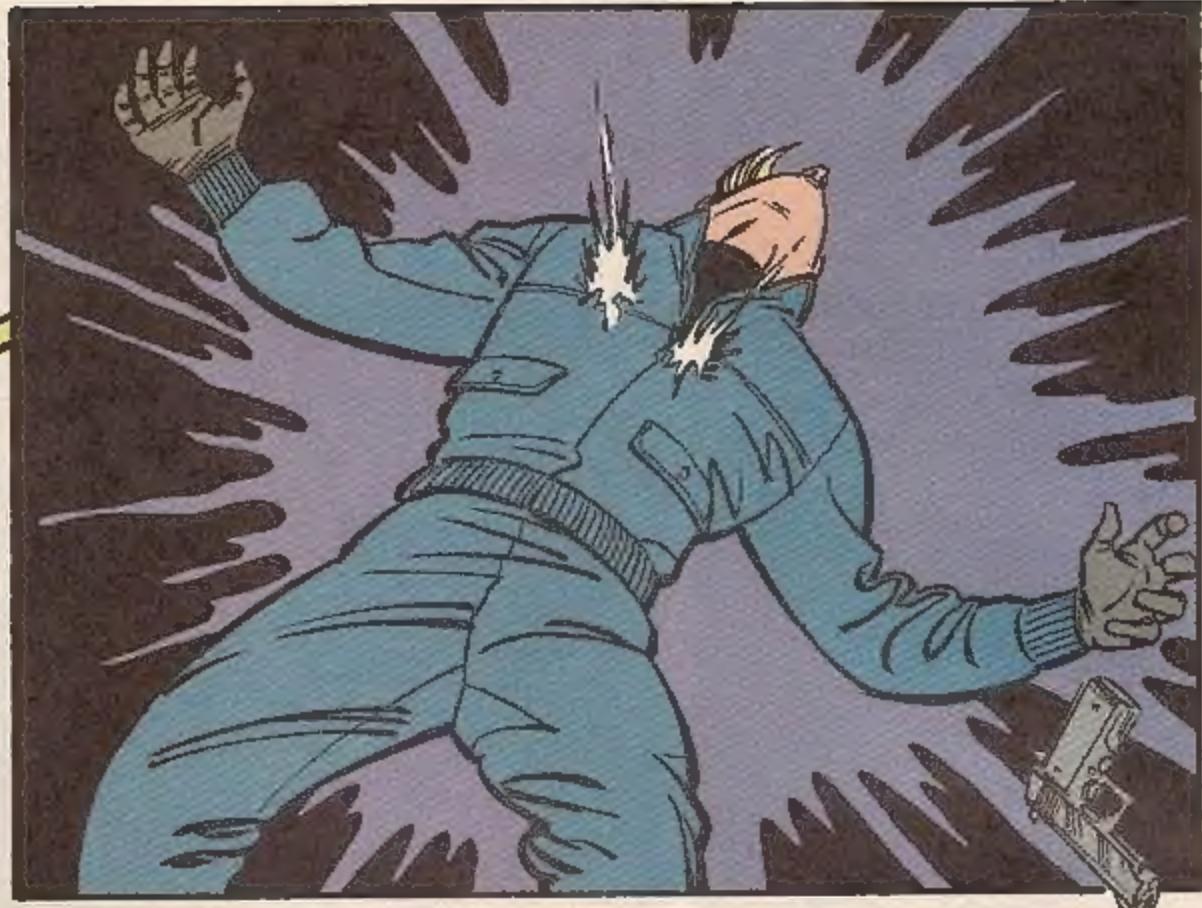
WAS THIS A CRANK CALL? WITH THE ENEMIES I'D MADE IN THE LAST EIGHT YEARS, I COULDN'T TAKE THAT CHANCE... EVEN THOUGH MY SECURITY ALARM SYSTEM WAS ON...

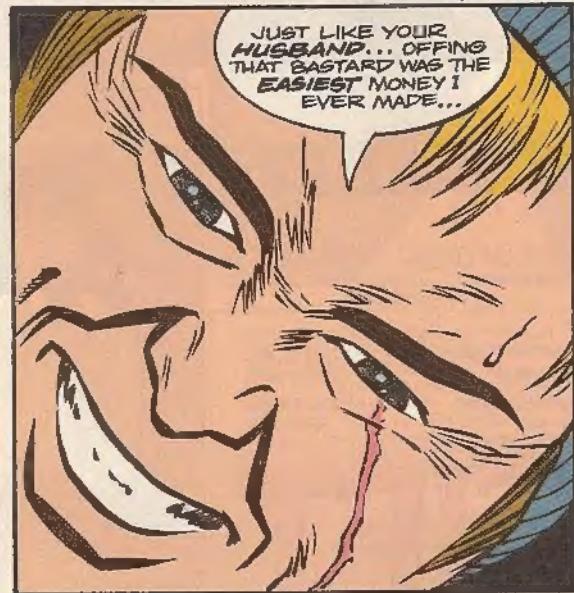
... AND IF ANYONE HAD ENTERED WITHOUT THE KEY TO TURN THE SYSTEM OFF, THAT ALARM WOULD SOUND WITHIN THIRTY SECONDS OF ENTRY.



ON THE OTHER HAND, ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS A PRIVATE DETECTIVE LEARNS IS THAT THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A RELIABLE SECURITY SYSTEM.









Ms.TREE

GARY KATO
letterer

KATIE MAIN
development
associate

TOM ZUIKO
colorist

MIKE GOLD
editor

GIFT OF DEATH



I'D KNOWN RAFE VALER A LONG TIME. HE WAS A HOMICIDE LIEUTENANT NOW.

IT TOOK SOMEBODY WELL-OFF AND WELL-CONNECTED TO SEND IN A PRO LIKE THIS.

RAFE HAD BEEN A ROOKIE WHEN MY HUSBAND MIKE TOOK HIM UNDER HIS WING. MIKE WAS A COP THEN, TOO - IRONICALLY, IT WAS AS A PRIVATE DETECTIVE THAT HE DIED IN THE LINE OF DUTY... WORKING FOR THE D.A. ON MOB-INFLUENCED POLICE CORRUPTION.

IS THIS A MOB HIT, MICHAEL? IS THE MUERTA FAMILY FINALLY SETTLING UP WITH YOU?

ASK HIM.



"CUTE, MICHAEL. HOW LONG CAN THIS GO ON? HOW LONG DO YOU THINK I CAN COVER FOR YOU?"

I SAID NOTHING.

"THE MUERTA FAMILY KILLS MIKE," RAFE SAYS. "YOU KILL DOMINIC MUERTA... NOT TO MENTION GOD KNOWS HOW MANY OF HIS SOLDIERS. WHERE WILL IT END?"

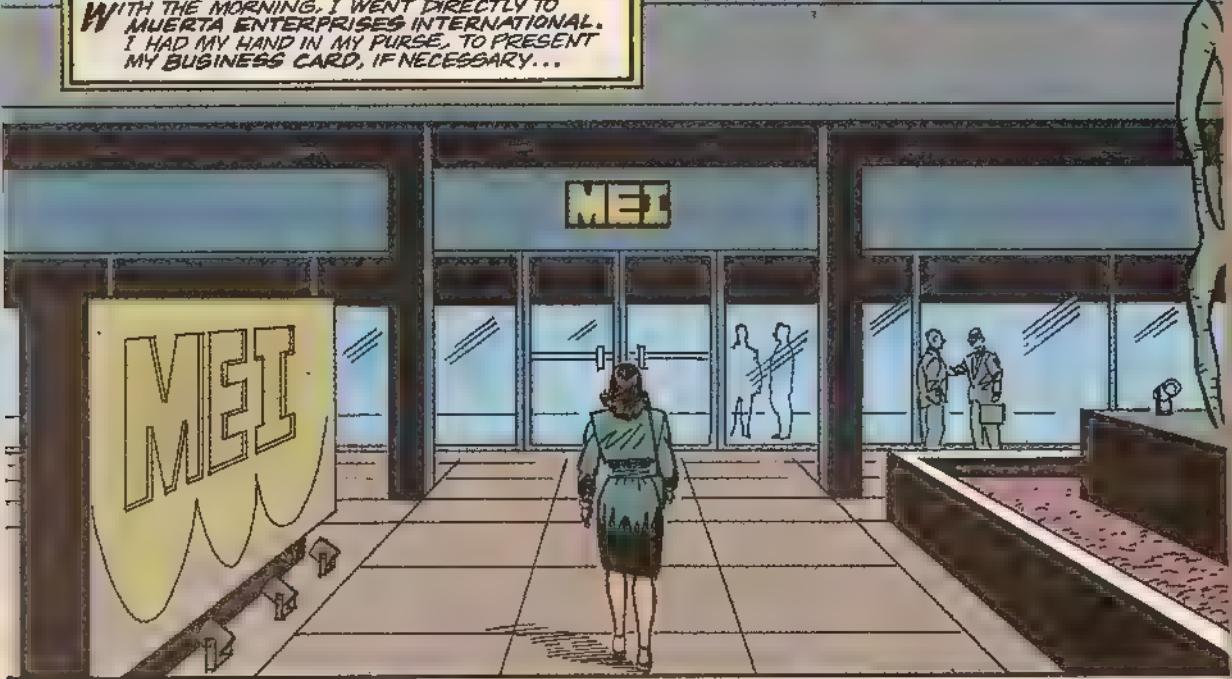
I SAID NOTHING.



"I THOUGHT YOUR WAR WAS IN A STATE OF TRUCE,"
RAFE SAID. "I THOUGHT YOU AND MUERTA'S
SISTER DOMINIQUE HAD AN UNDERSTANDING -"

I SAID NOTHING. BUT I THOUGHT: SO DID I.

WITH THE MORNING, I WENT DIRECTLY TO
MUERTA ENTERPRISES INTERNATIONAL.
I HAD MY HAND IN MY PURSE, TO PRESENT
MY BUSINESS CARD, IF NECESSARY...



A NINE-MILLIMETER
BUSINESS CARD.

MICHAEL TREE
TO SEE
DOMINIQUE MUERTA.
I DON'T HAVE AN
APPOINTMENT,
BUT...

GO
RIGHT IN,
MS. TREE ...

... YOU'RE
EXPECTED.

GOOD MORNING, MS. TREE.
I TRUST YOU ENJOYED MY
LITTLE PEACE OFFERING
LAST NIGHT.





YOUR GUEST LAST NIGHT WAS A FREE-LANCER... NOT IN OUR REGULAR EMPLOY. NEVER BEFORE IN MINE. BUT I WAS ABLE TO DETERMINE THAT HE WAS, IN FACT, INDEED THE ONE WHO... HOW SHALL I PUT IT?

MURDERED MY HUSBAND. ONLY HE WAS JUST A TRIGGER. IT WAS YOUR BROTHER'S DOING.



"AND YOU HAD YOUR REVENGE ON MY BROTHER, DIDN'T YOU, MS. TREE? YOU MURDERED HIM IN COLD BLOOD. YOU WENT TO JAIL FOR IT... YOU WENT TO A MENTAL WARD...



BUT THAT IS IN THE PAST. WE MUST LET BYGONES BE BYGONES.

BYGONES BE BYGONES? LADY, YOU'RE THE NEXT CANDIDATE FOR THE LAUGHING ACADEMY!

NO, I'M QUITE SANE. IT'S TIME WE PUT OUR DIFFERENCES BEHIND US, MS. TREE... MICHAEL. THAT'S WHY I SERVED YOU YOUR HUSBAND'S KILLER ON A PLATTER.



WE DO HAVE MUCH IN COMMON, MICHAEL. WE ARE LONELY IN THE WAY STRONG WOMEN IN THIS COUNTRY OFTEN ARE. YOU RUN YOUR OWN BUSINESS, SMALL THOUGH IT IS COMPARED TO MY RESPONSIBILITIES..."

LIKE ME, YOU HAVE MANY ACQUAINTANCES BUT FEW FRIENDS. AND PERHAPS, LIKE ME, THERE'S ONLY ONE OTHER PERSON FOR WHOM YOU FEEL SOMETHING ... TENDER.

"YOUR STEPSON - MICHAEL TREE, JR. - MEANS EVERYTHING TO YOU... HE'S YOUR LINK TO YOUR LATE, LOST HUSBAND."

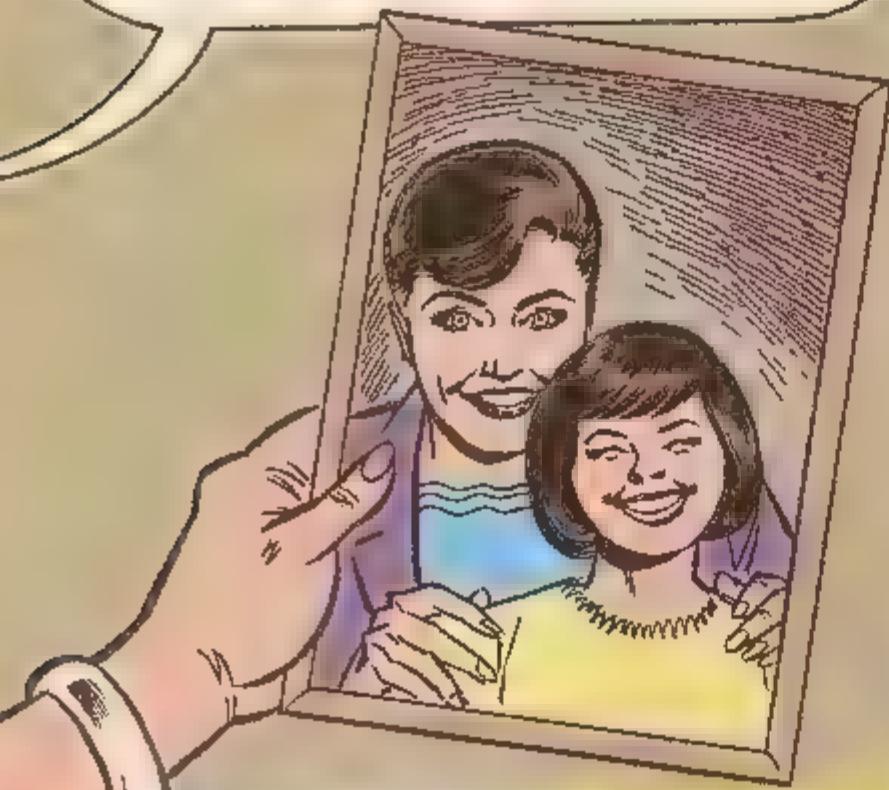
"YOU THREE ARE LINKED INEXORABLY - THE THREE OF YOU EVEN SHARE THE SAME FIRST NAME. UNUSUAL NAME FOR A WOMAN - MICHAEL..."

MY FATHER WANTED A BOY. SOME WOULD SAY HE DAMN NEAR GOT ONE. BY THE WAY, YOUR SECURITY HERE SUCKS.

THAT'S PART OF WHAT I WANT TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT! AND YOU DON'T NEED THAT GUN. PLEASE.

LISA - MY DAUGHTER - IS THE MOST
IMPORTANT PERSON IN MY LIFE.
AND I WON'T HAVE HER HURT.
I WON'T ALLOW THAT...

"AS YOU WELL KNOW, MISTREE... MICHAEL
... OUR CHILDREN HAVE NOT YET GOTTEN
OVER THEIR INFATUATION. I HAD THOUGHT
THEIR ATTACHMENT, FORMED IN THEIR CHANCE
MEETING AT GREENWOOD ACADEMY, WOULD
FADE, WITH TIME..."



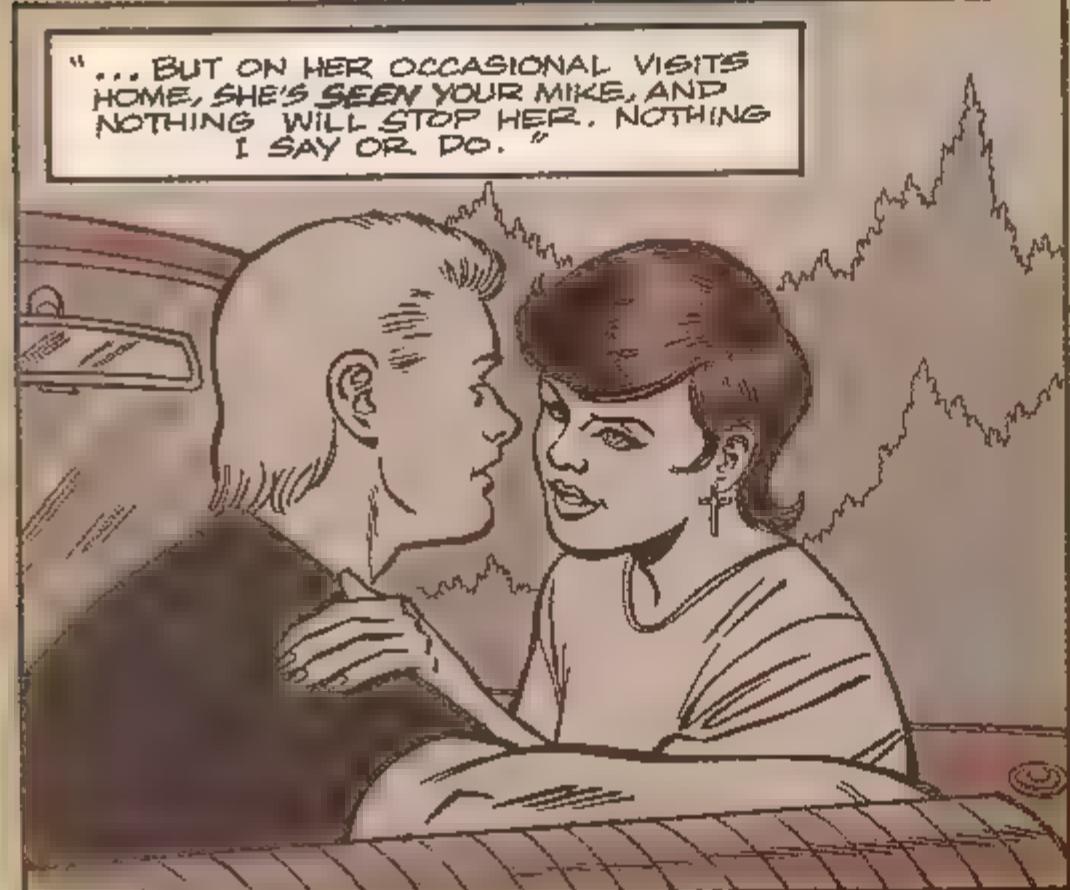
YOU SHOULD'VE
LET IT RUN ITS
COURSE. INSTEAD
YOU SENT HER PACKING
WHO-KNOWS-WHERE...
THAT SORT OF TACTIC
ONLY FUELS
YOUNG LOVE.

SO I'VE LEARNED.
ONE WOULD THINK
A CONVENT SCHOOL
IN SWITZERLAND
WOULD HAVE
BEEN FAR
ENOUGH...



"... BUT ON HER OCCASIONAL VISITS
HOME, SHE'S SEEN YOUR MIKE, AND
NOTHING WILL STOP HER. NOTHING
I SAY OR DO."

"I KNOW," I SAID. "AND I'VE
SEEN THE STACK OF LETTERS
FROM LISA, HIDDEN AWAY
IN MIKE'S DRAWER...
IT'S NONE OF MY BUSINESS,
BUT THEN I AM A
DETECTIVE."



BUT IF YOU THINK YOU CAN RECRUIT ME IN SOME EFFORT TO SEPARATE THESE KIDS, YOU'RE BLOWING SMOKE RINGS, LADY. I DON'T LIKE IT ANY MORE THAN YOU DO, BUT IT'S THEIR LIVES, AND...

NO! YOU MISUNDERSTAND.

I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WHAT THEY FEEL IS REAL - THAT IT MAY IN FACT BE LASTING. THEY'RE BOTH OF COLLEGE AGE NOW... NEITHER OF US COULD KEEP THEM APART, IF WE WANTED TO.

"NO, MICHAEL - WHAT I PROPOSE IS THAT THE TREES AND MUERTAS PUT THEIR DIFFERENCES BEHIND THEM AND MOVE FORWARD... IN FACT, I WOULD SUGGEST THAT YOU AND I JOIN FORCES."

WHAT?

"MICHAEL, IN TWO YEARS MUERTA ENTERPRISES INTERNATIONAL WILL BE 100% LEGITIMATE. I'M DOING THIS FOR MY DAUGHTER, PARTIALLY, BUT ALSO BECAUSE THERE IS NO LONGER A NEED TO MAKE MONEY THE OLD WAY."



ENTERPRISES THAT BEGAN, YEARS AGO, AS MONEY-LAUDDERING OPERATIONS - FRONTS OF VARIOUS KINDS - HAVE BECOME ENORMOUSLY PROFITABLE IN THEIR OWN RIGHT.

WE HAVE AN EVER-EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF HOTELS, THEATERS AND LEGAL CASINOS. WE'RE IN THE BOOK AND MAGAZINE BUSINESSES, THE RECORDING BUSINESS...WE STILL TEND TO THE NEEDS OF THE CONSUMER FOR ENTERTAINMENT AND RELAXATION...



YOU'RE JUST PHASING OUT CERTAIN "ENTERTAINMENT AND RELAXATION" AREAS - LIKE PORNOGRAPHY, ILLEGAL GAMBLING AND NARCOTICS.



YES, THAT WAS MY BROTHER'S STYLE, AFTER ALL, NOT MINE. THESE ARE NEW TIMES.



AND THERE'S NO RESISTANCE IN THE RANKS?

SOME. BUT I HAVE THE FULL SUPPORT OF MY SECOND-IN-COMMAND: MY NEPHEW DONALD... DONNIE IS A FINE, BRILLIANT BOY.



... WHERE DO I FIT
INTO THESE GRANDIOSE
AND OH-SO-NOBLE PLANS?

YOU SAID IT YOURSELF.
MICHAEL — MY SECURITY
“SUCKS.” I NEED A NEW
HEAD OF SECURITY... AND
YOU WOULD BE IDEAL.

THE JOB WOULD PAY \$400,000
A YEAR... AND AS YOU'D HAVE
TO CLOSE YOUR OWN AGENCY, YOU
COULD BRING YOUR FULL TREES
INVESTIGATIONS, INC. STAFF
ABOARD, AT THEIR CURRENT
SALARIES PLUS 20%.



SOME DAY WE MAY BE
RELATED... BY MARRIAGE.
IT'S AN OLD MUERTA
TRADITION TO KEEP
THE BUSINESS
WITHIN THE
FAMILY.

WHAT IS
YOUR
ANSWER,
MICHAEL
?



Presumptuous bitch...
Sooner sleep with
a snake...



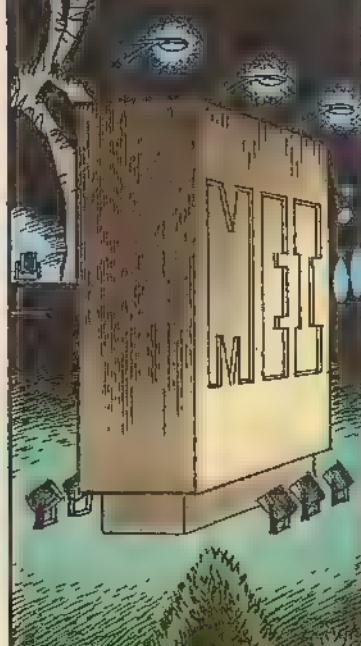
I VENTED MY ANGER THE BEST WAY I KNEW HOW:
I THREW MYSELF INTO MY WORK, BURYING
MYSELF IN ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS I'D BEEN
PUTTING OFF...



I WASN'T AWARE OF IT, OF COURSE, BUT A SIMILAR SCENE WAS BEING PLAYED OUT ELSEWHERE.



WILL YOU BE NEEDING ME TO STAY LATE, MS. MUERTA?



I HEARD YOU HAD A LITTLE SCUFFLE TODAY. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

YES, I'M FINE — MY DIGNITY IS A LITTLE BRUISED, THAT'S ALL —

I TOLD YOU THAT BITCH WAS DANGEROUS. SHE HAS TOO MUCH MISPLACED PRIDE TO WORK FOR THE MUERTAS —

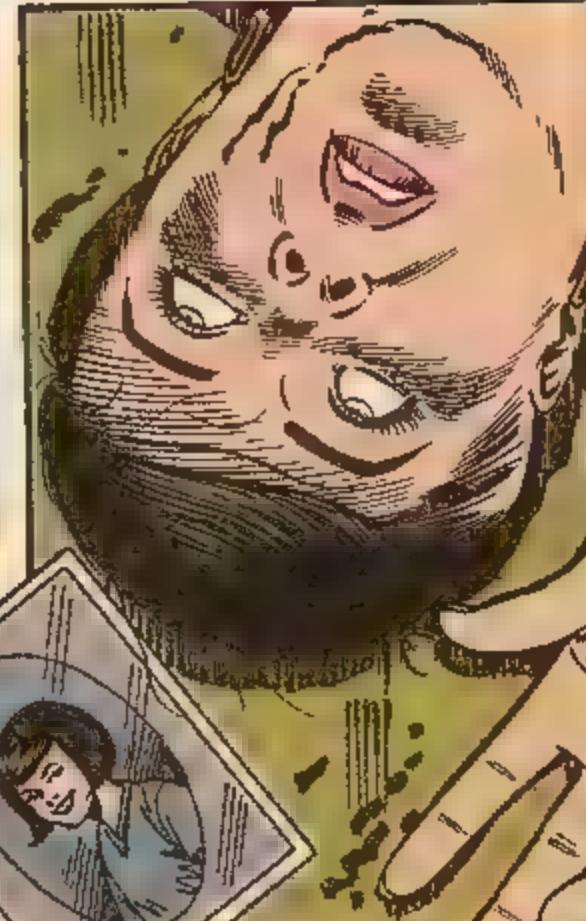
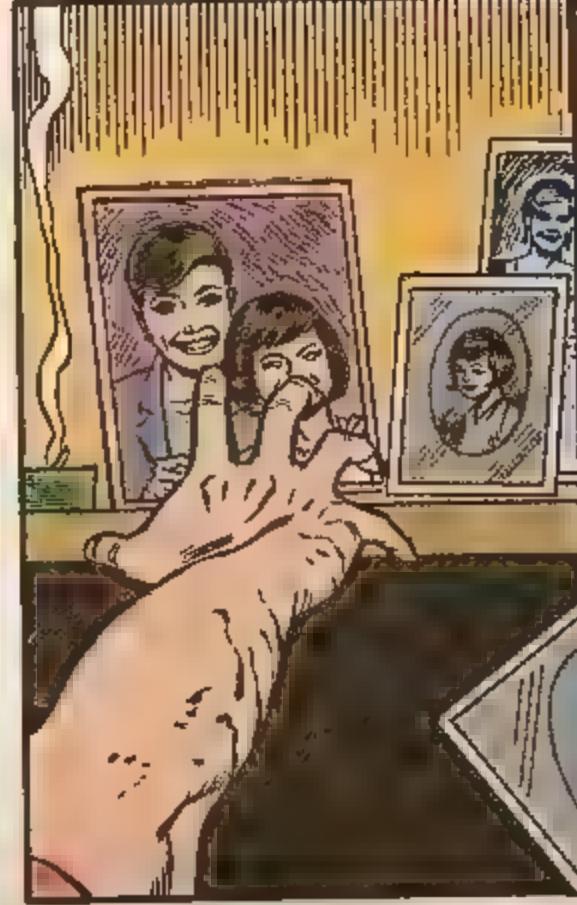
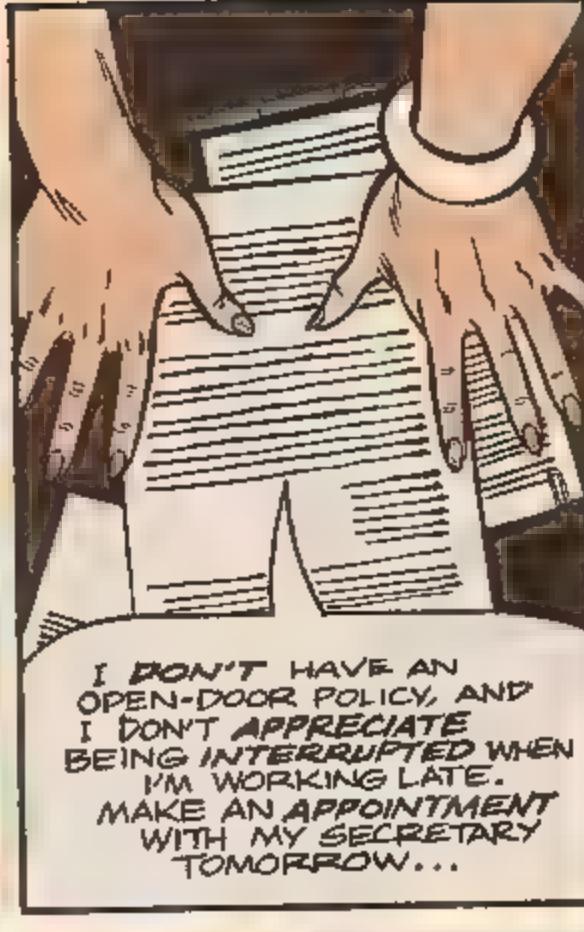
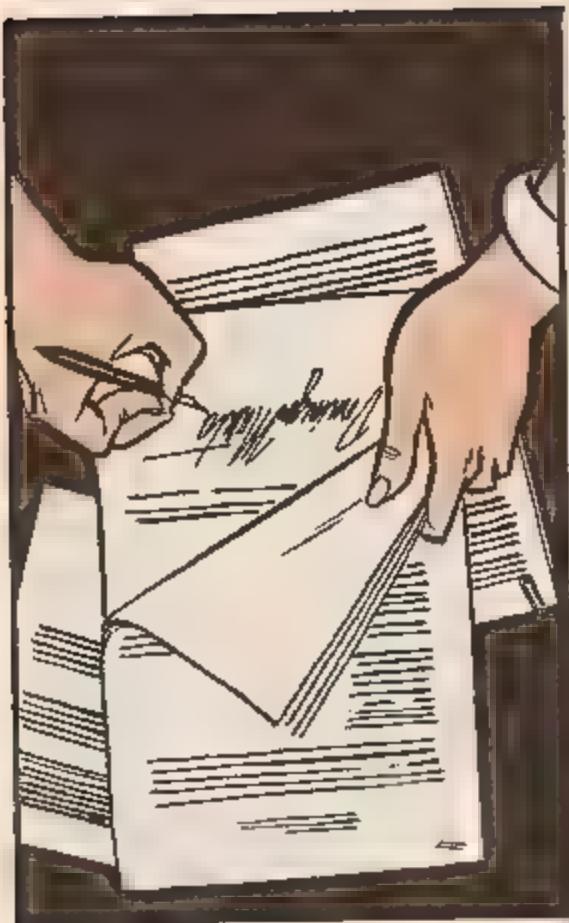
SUCH HUMILIATION I COULD NOT HAVE SUFFERED WITHOUT MAXIMUM RETALIATION. AT ONE TIME ...

TIMES HAVE CHANGED. WE'RE A FORTUNE 500 COMPANY NOW. GOTTA MIND THE STORE — AND OUR IMAGE ...

AND THERE'S LISA TO CONSIDER.

I'LL HAVE THE FIGURES ON THE ATLANTIC CITY EXPANSION TOMORROW MORNING. 'NIGHT, AUNTIE.

GOOD NIGHT, DONNIE. THANK YOU.



MORNING WAS ALWAYS AN AWKWARD TIME FOR MY STEPSON AND ME. WE'VE NEVER QUITE WORKED OUT HIS RESENTMENT FOR ME — THE WOMAN WHO TOOK HIS MOTHER'S PLACE IN HIS FATHER'S HEART.

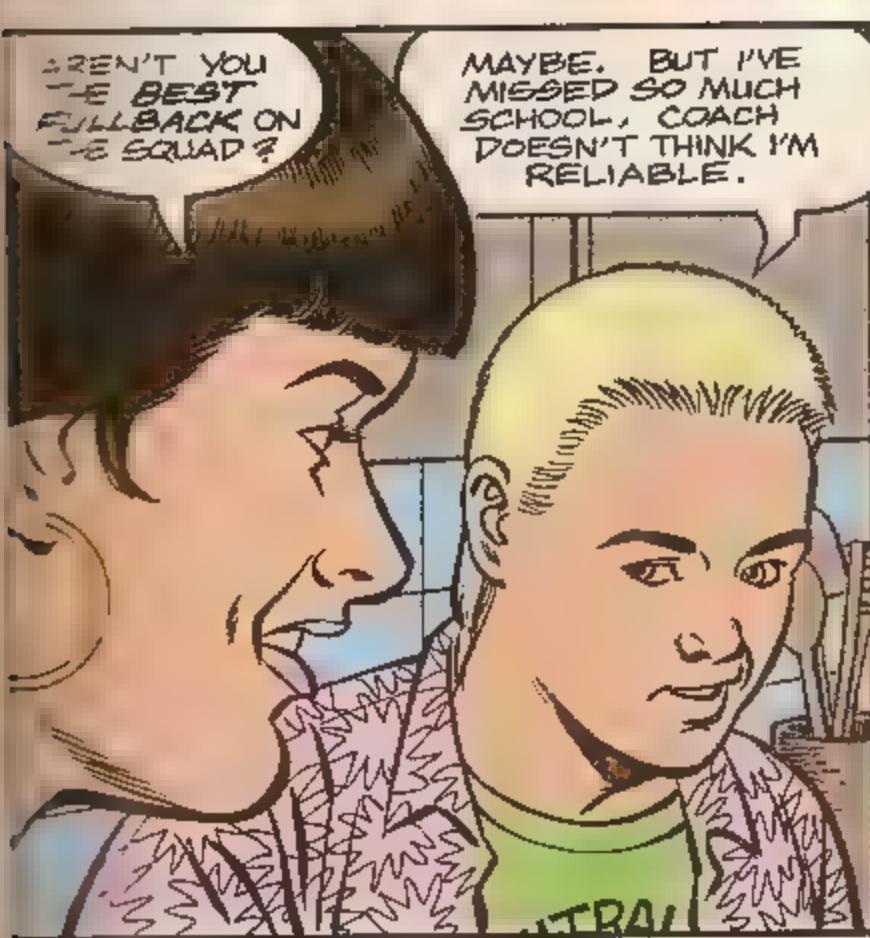


THAT BOTH OF THEM WERE DEAD, AND I WAS ALL THAT WAS LEFT, DIDN'T HELP.



AREN'T YOU THE BEST FULLBACK ON THE SQUAD?

MAYBE. BUT I'VE MISSED SO MUCH SCHOOL, COACH DOESN'T THINK I'M RELIABLE.



I'M SORRY, MIKE. IT'S BEEN HARD -- TUTORS, PRIVATE SCHOOLS ... BUT WE'VE BEEN ON THE FIRING LINE, YOU AND ME.

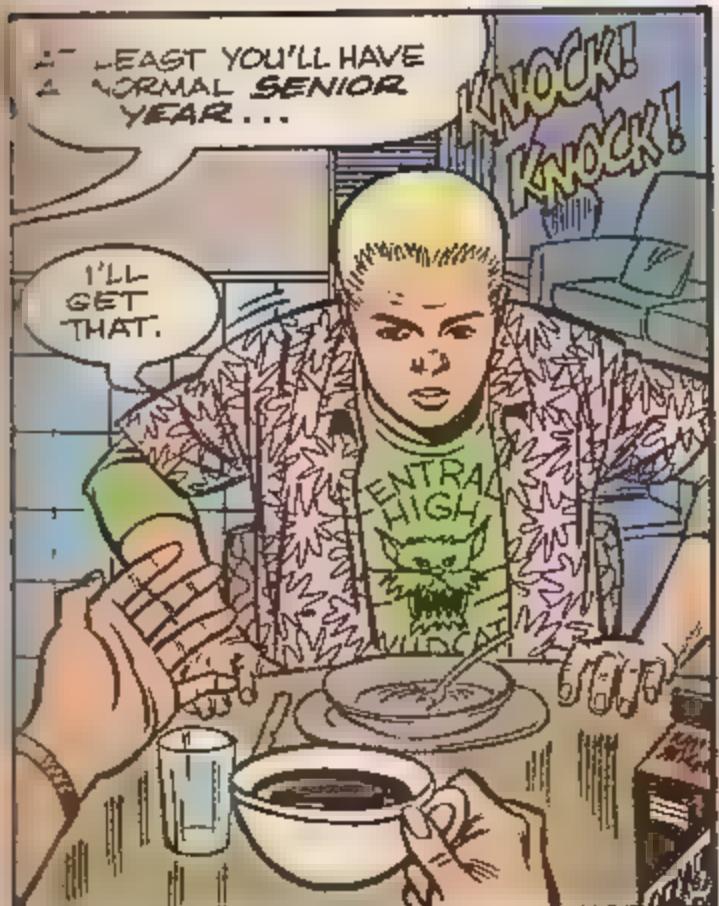
I KNOW.



— AT LEAST YOU'LL HAVE A NORMAL SENIOR YEAR...

KNOCK!
KNOCK!

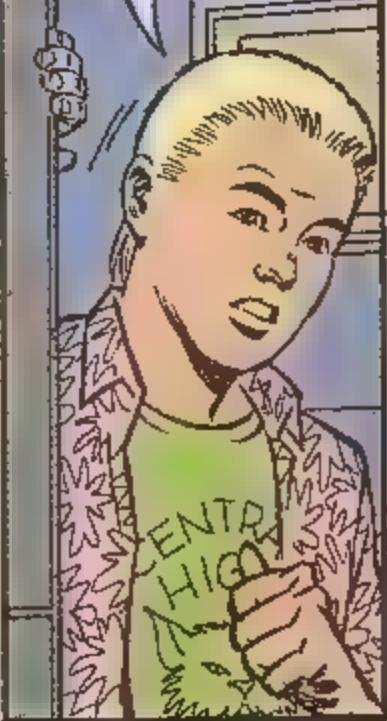
I'LL GET THAT.



IT'S YOUR POLICEMAN PAL —

OPEN

ENTRA
HIGH



RAFE — IT'S A LITTLE EARLY, ISN'T IT?

NEVER TOO EARLY FOR HOMICIDE, MICHAEL —



A MAINTENANCE MAN HAD FOUND DOMINIQUE'S BODY. NO WITNESSES HAD SEEN ANYTHING RELATING TO THE AFTER-HOURS SHOOTING.

AM I YOUR PRIME SUSPECT? I HAD A HELL OF A HISTORY WITH HER... NOT TO MENTION PUNCHING HER, LIGHTS OUT YESTERDAY.

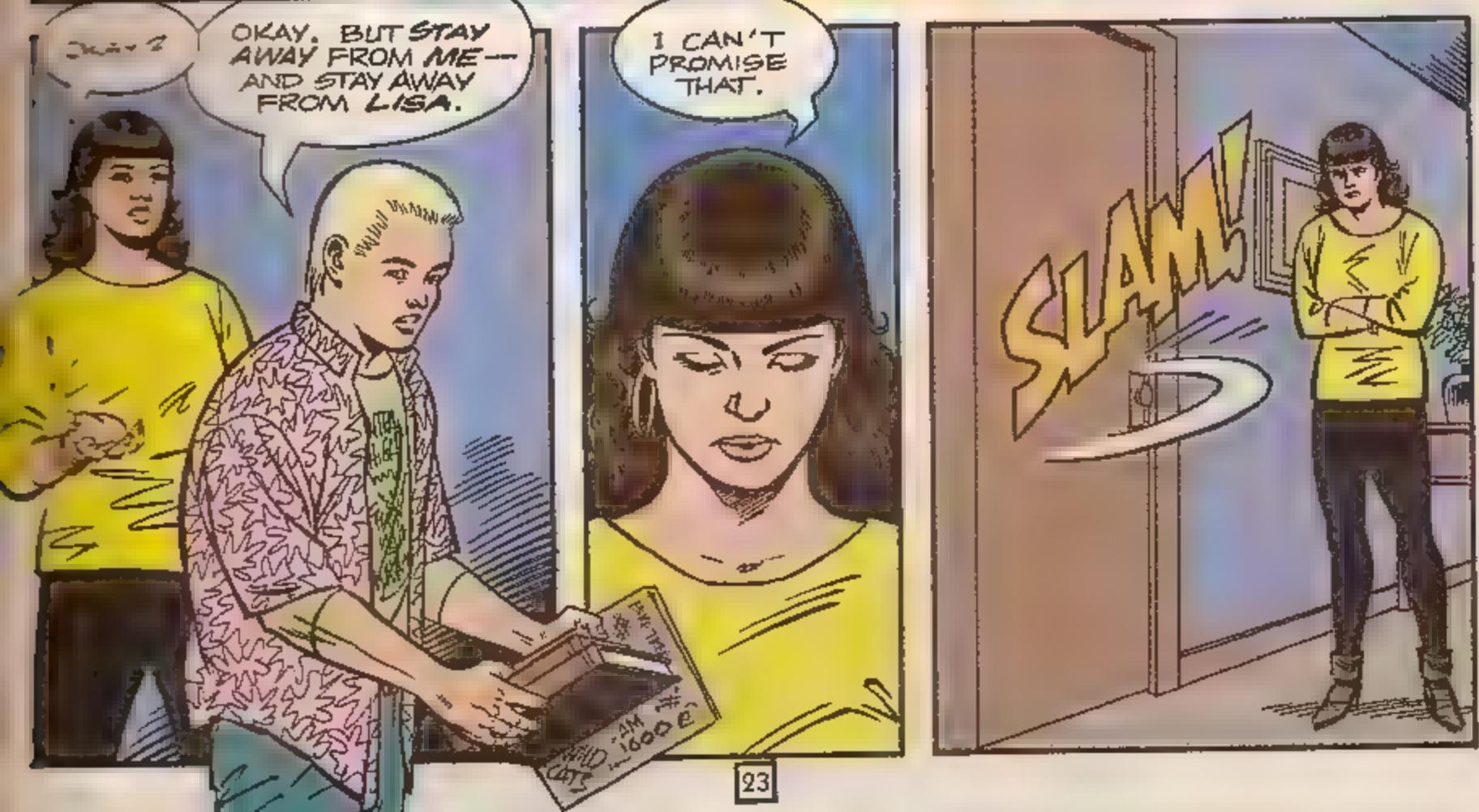
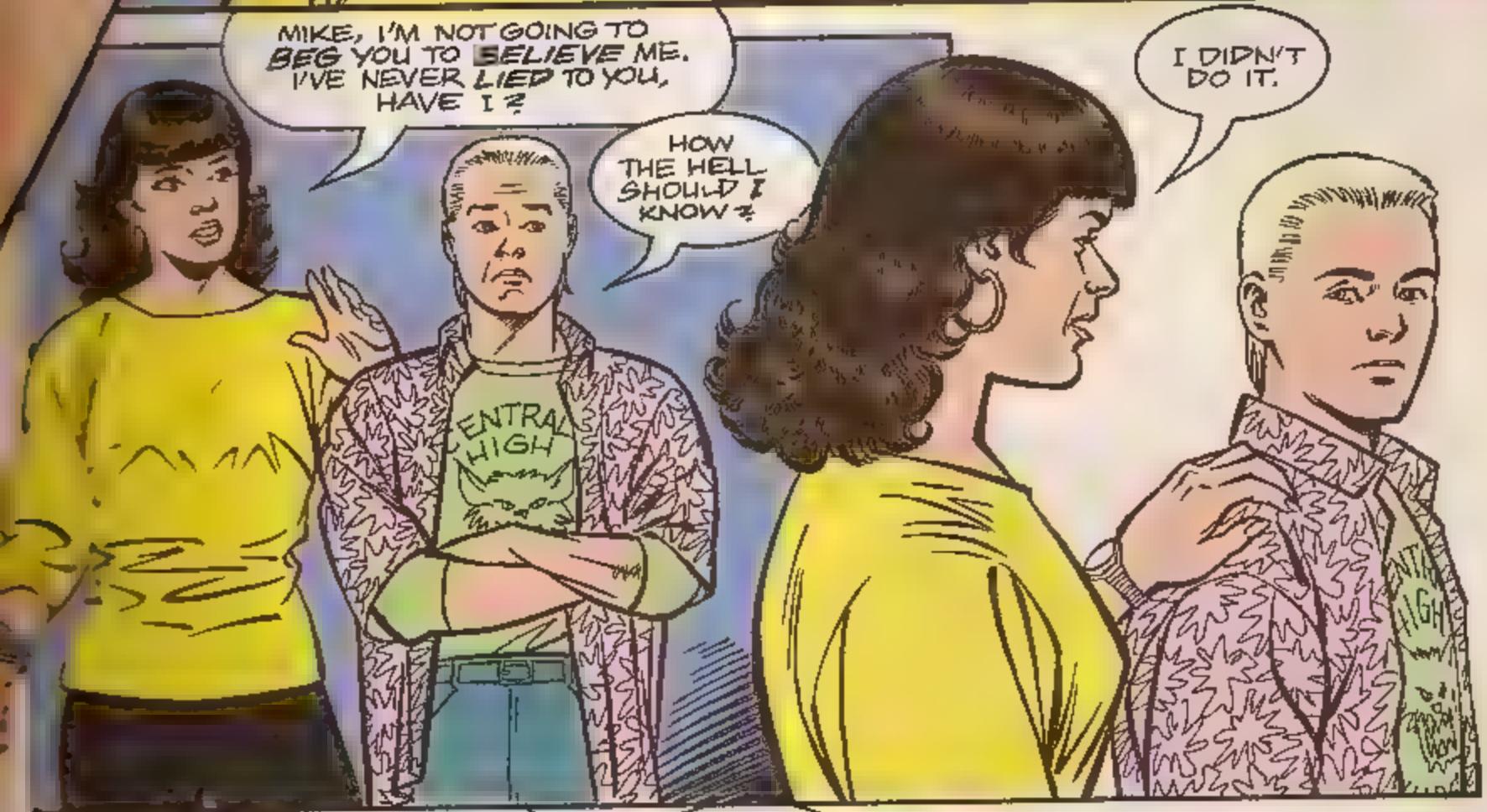
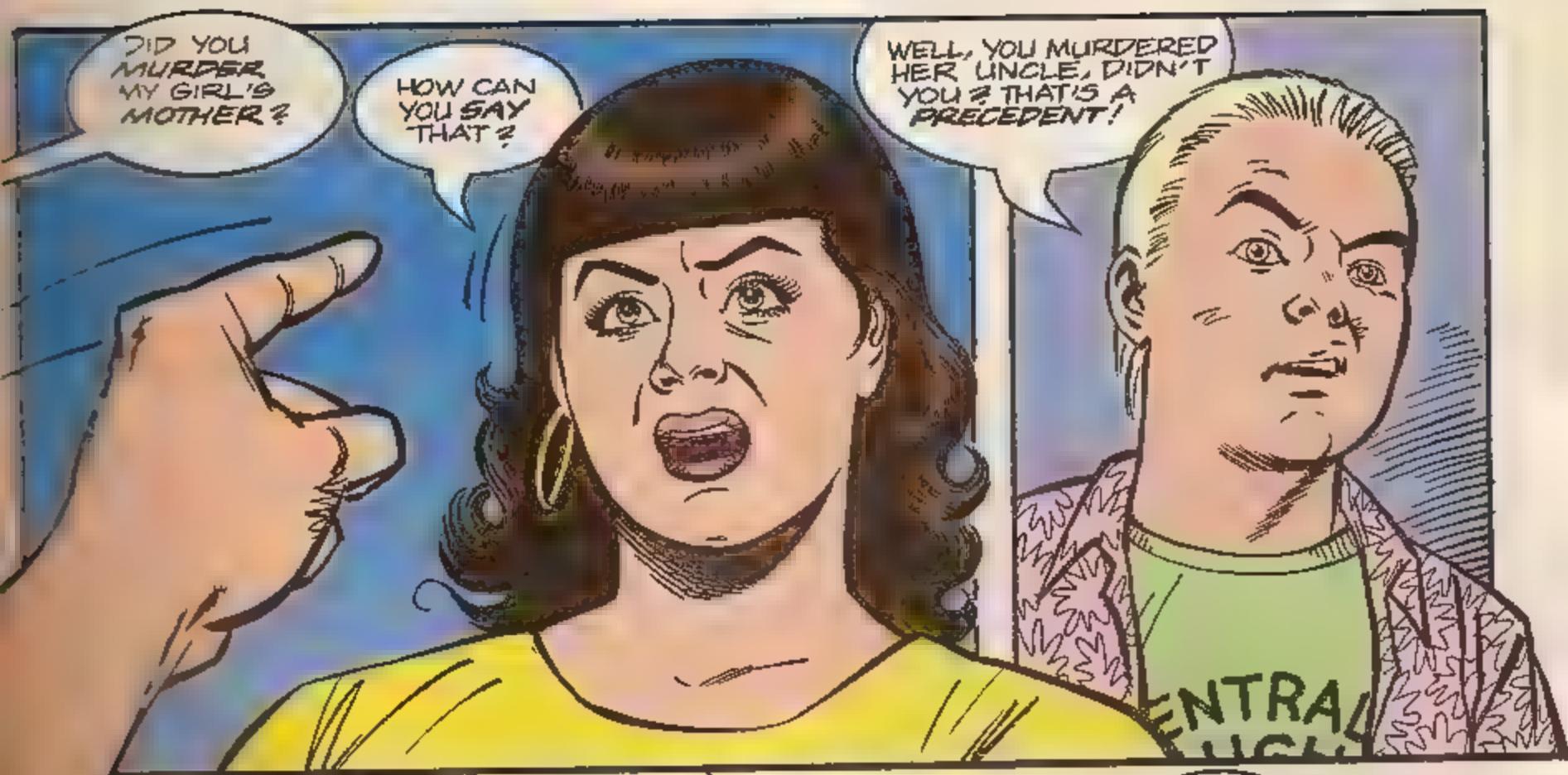


WE KNOW ALL ABOUT THAT LITTLE INCIDENT. SHE WAS KILLED IN HER OFFICE, WHERE YOU FOUGHT.

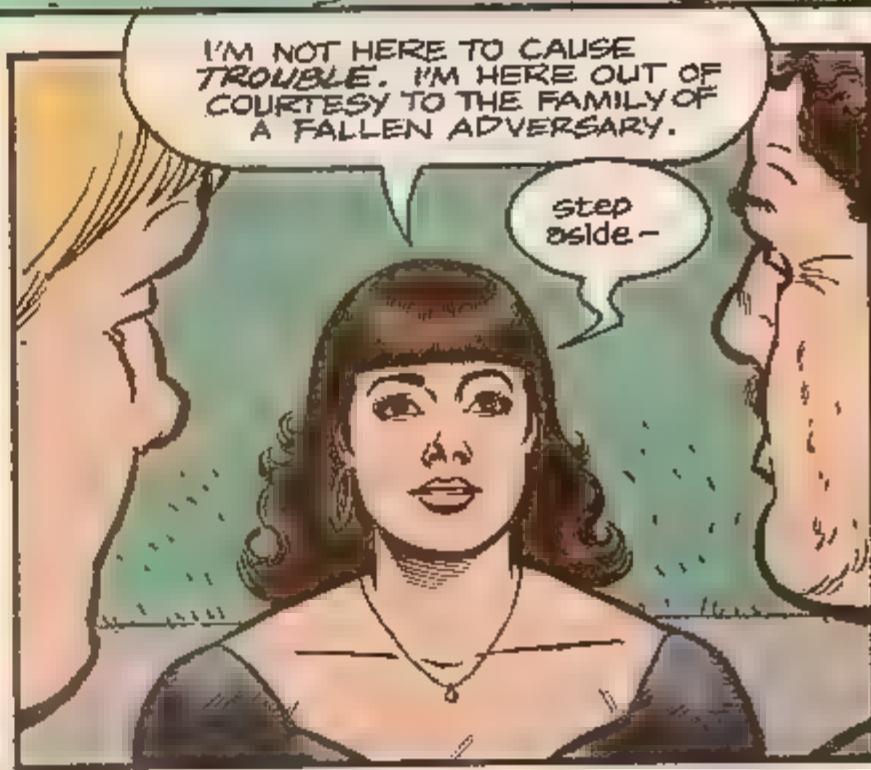
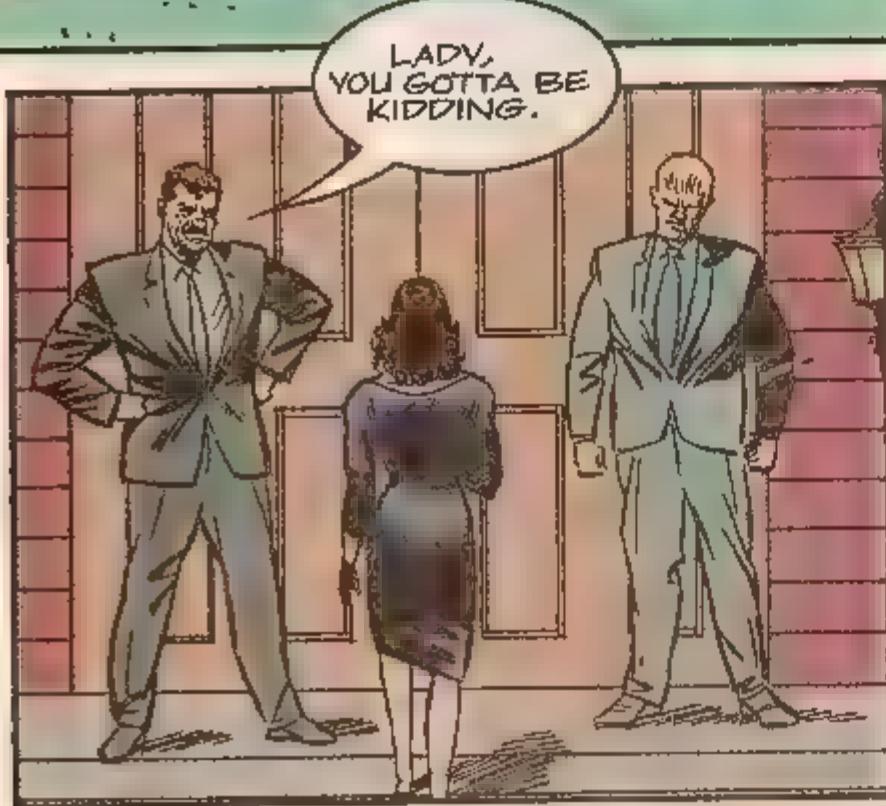
WE DIDN'T "FIGHT." I DECKED HER. ESTIMATED TIME OF DEATH?

SEVEN-THIRTY P.M. YOU HAVE AN ALIBI?

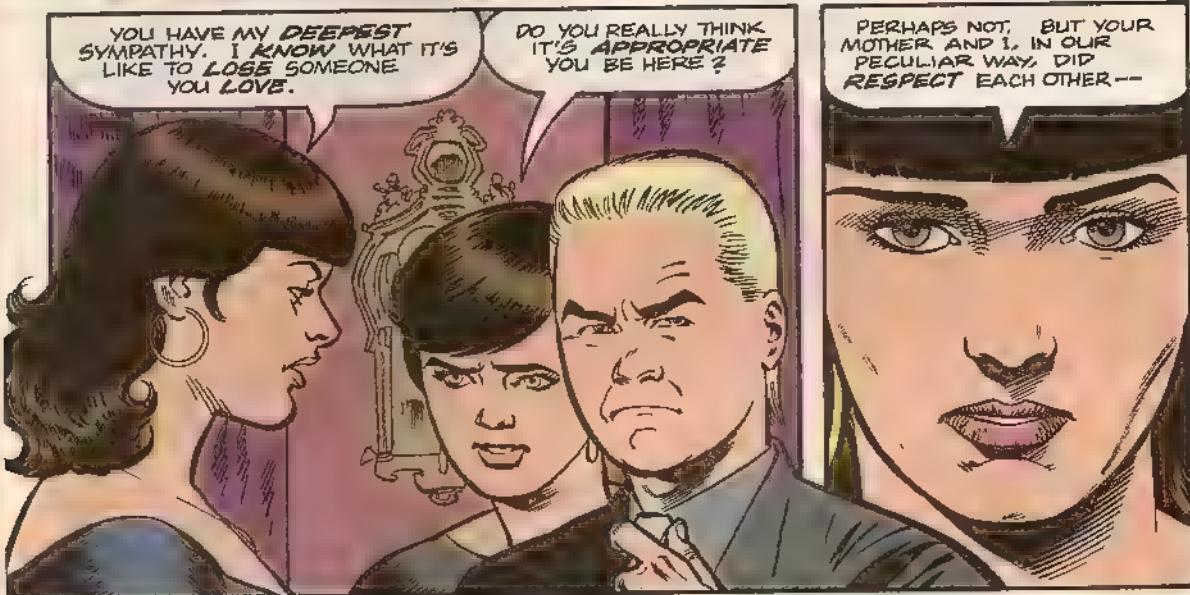


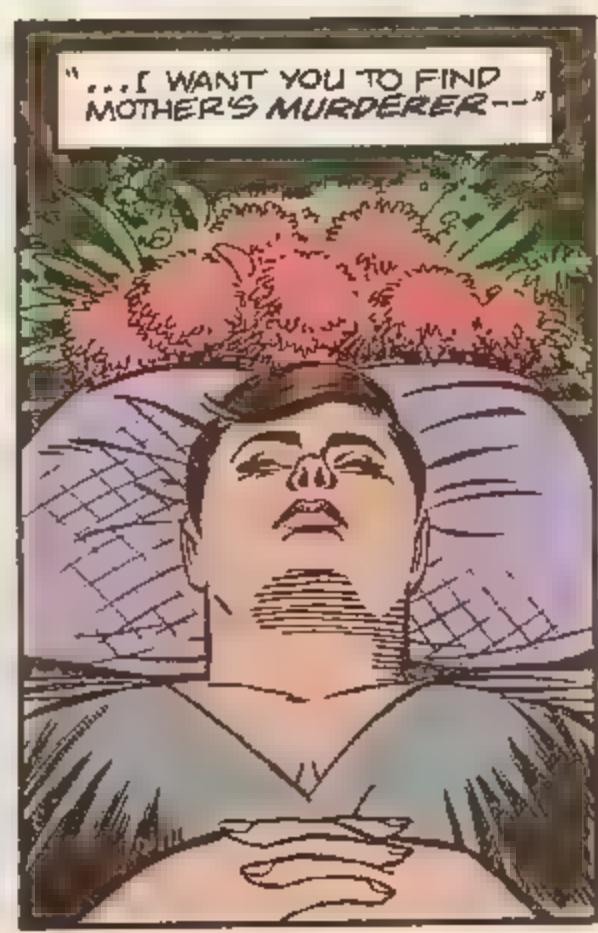
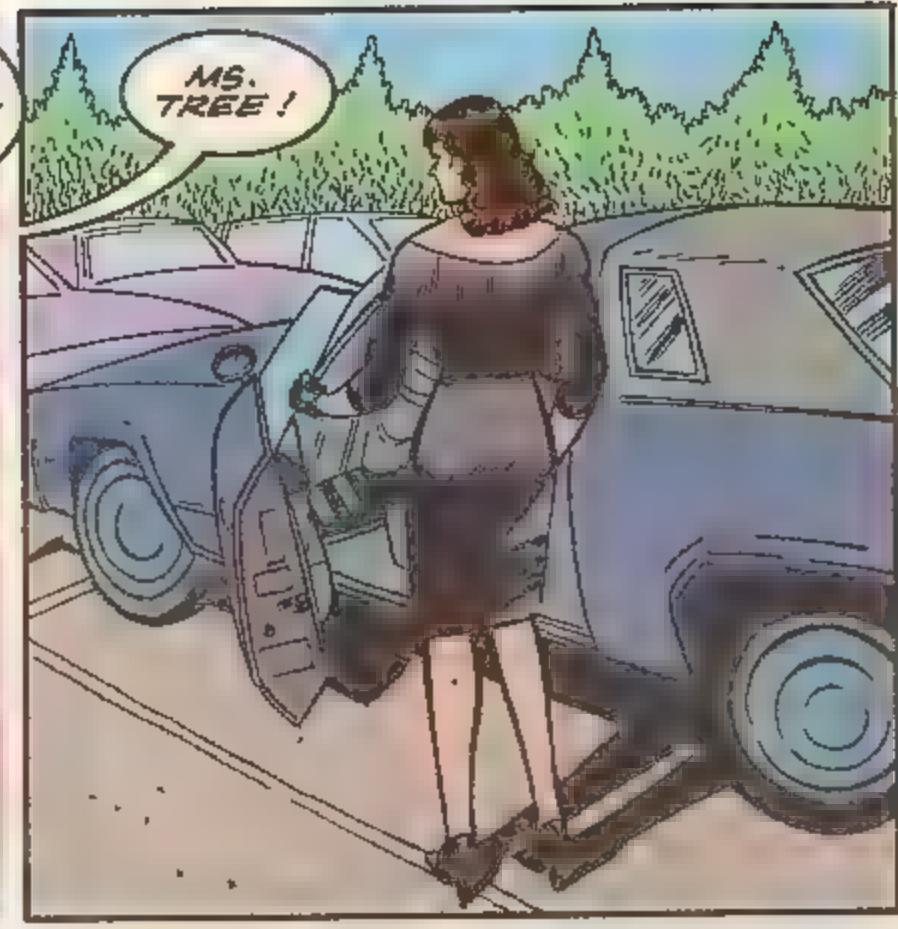


VISITATION TO PAY LAST RESPECTS TO DOMINIQUE MUERTA WAS AT A SUBURBAN FUNERAL HOME THE NEXT AFTERNOON.









SHE WAS PREPARED TO PAY -- SHE
WAS A WEALTHY YOUNG WOMAN,
AFTER ALL.

NAME YOUR
PRICE.

IT'S
NOT MONETARY,
LISA.

I WANT YOU
TO PROMISE
ME THAT YOU
AND MIKE WON'T
DO ANYTHING
RASH --

NO KNEEJERK ELOPEMENT --
I DON'T WANT A SON WHO
GOES ON HIS HONEYMOON
BEFORE HE GOES TO
THE PROM.

YOU STRIKE A
HARD BARGAIN --
BUT AGREED.

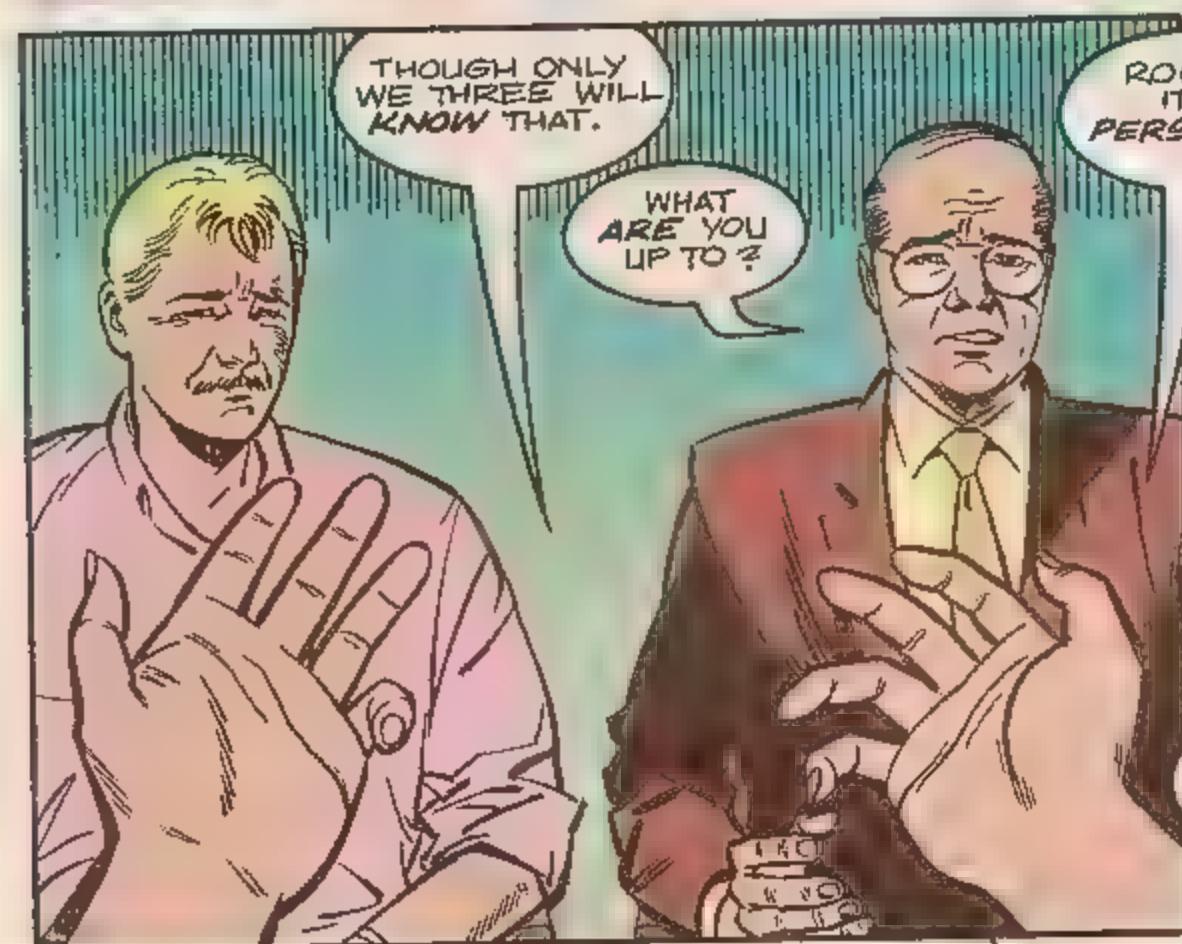
AND LISA --
NOT A WORD
OF THIS TO
ANYONE --

"... NOT MIKE, OR
ESPECIALLY YOUR
UNCLE DONNIE -- "

WHY?

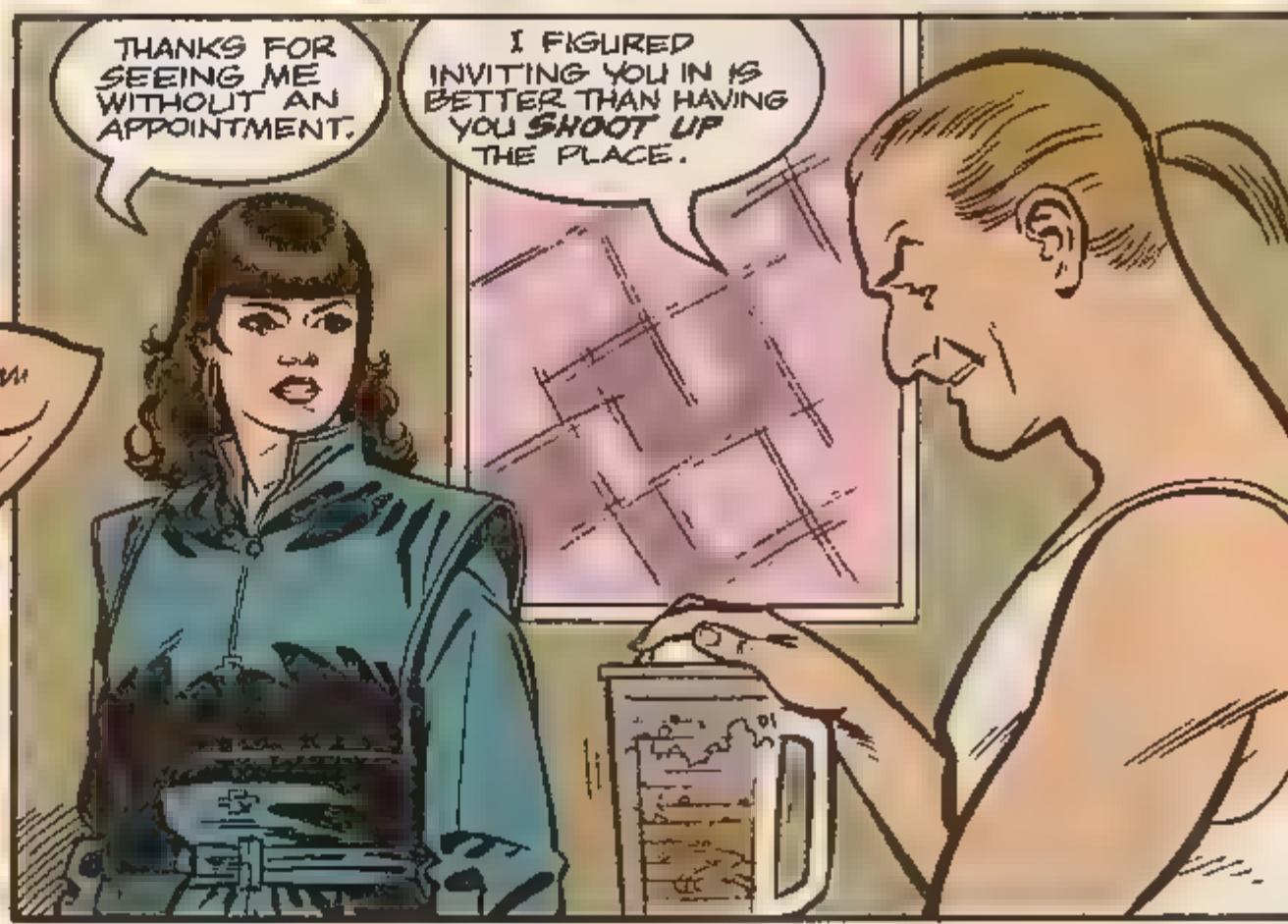
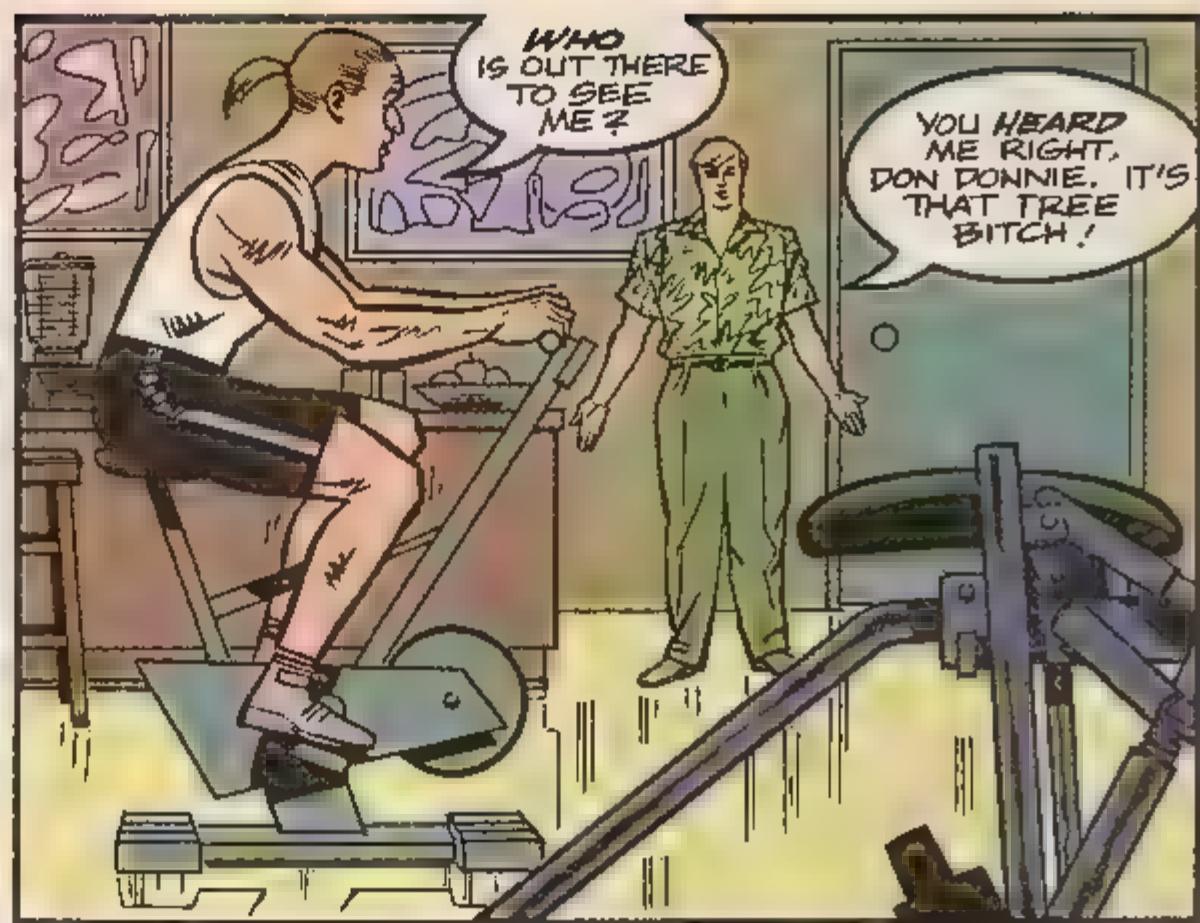
THIS IS A JOB I
CAN DO BEST FROM
THE INSIDE -- SO
THIS IS OUR
SECRET.





I WAITED TILL THE DAY
AFTER THE FUNERAL --
AND THEN I REPORTED
TO WORK.

MED

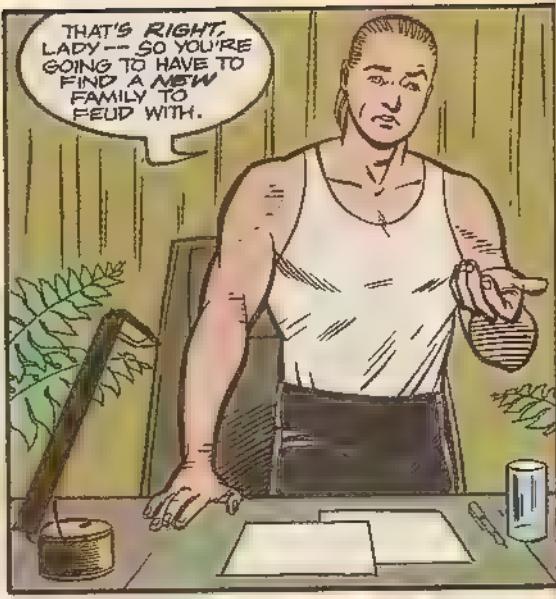


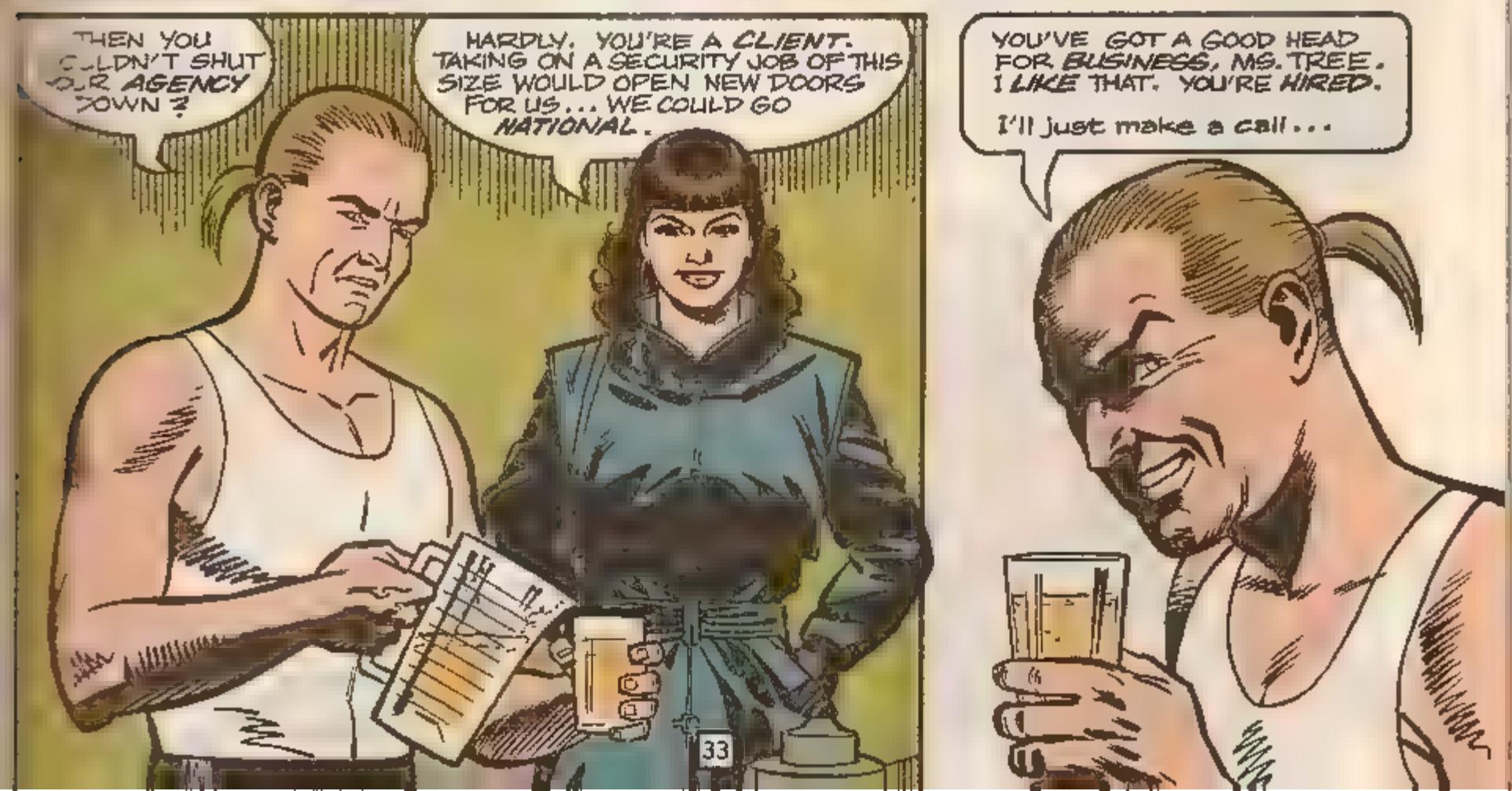
"SHOOTING UP" HAS
MADE A LOT OF MONEY
FOR THE MUERTAS
OVER THE YEARS.

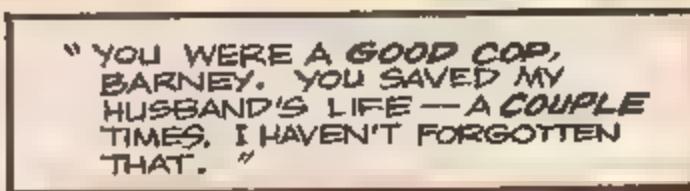
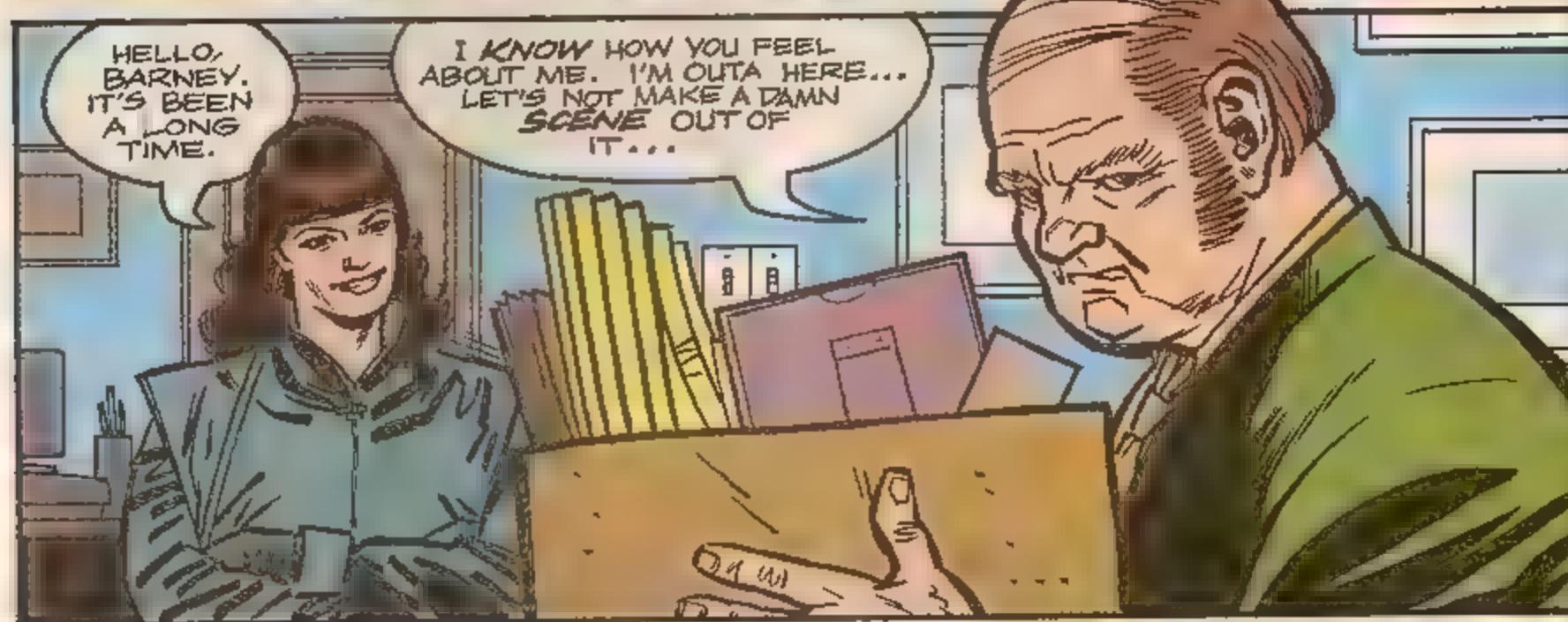
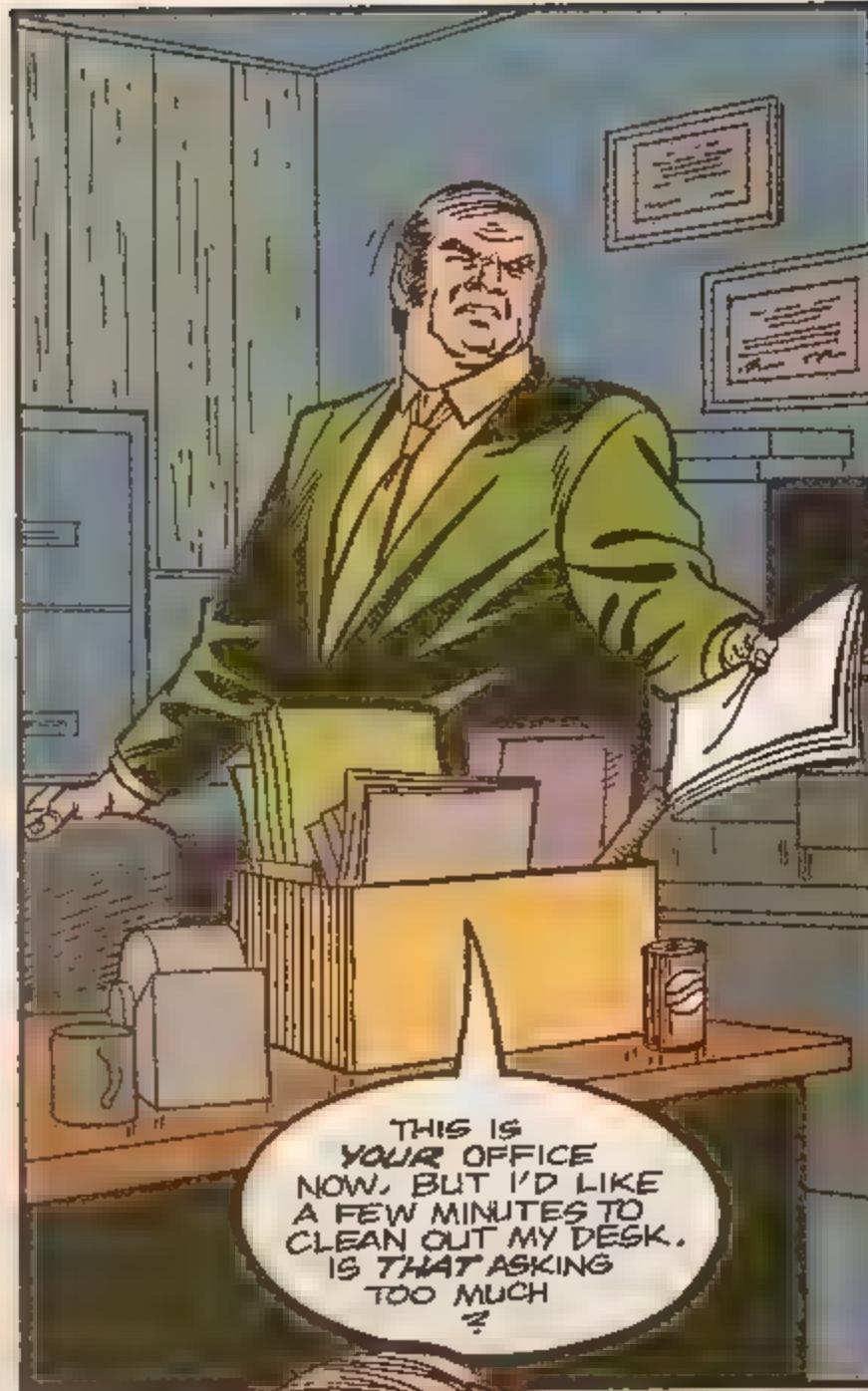


I DON'T BELIEVE IN
DRUGS --
FOR BUSINESS OR PLEASURE.











IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO GET UP AND RUNNING. ALL I WANTED WAS A SECRETARY AND A COMPUTER AND THE HELP OF BARNEY PHILLIPS. I'D MADE IT CLEAR TO HIM THAT MY FIRST ORDER OF BUSINESS WAS FINDING HIS LATE BOSS'S KILLER.

HERE THEY ARE, MS. TREE. EVERY FORMER EMPLOYEE WHO WORKED IN CORPORATE HQ AND WAS DISMISSED -- OR QUIT UNDER PRESSURE WITHIN THE PAST TWO YEARS.

THANK YOU. YOU KNOW, I'VE STUDIED YOUR SECURITY SET-UP, BARNEY.

I HEAR YOU THINK IT "SUCKS."

HYPERBOLE. ACTUALLY, IT'S NOT BAD... I GOT IN WITH A **GUN** ON ME, BUT SHORT OF AIRPORT-STYLE METAL DETECTORS AND A STATE-OF-SIEGE ATMOSPHERE, THERE'S NO PREVENTING THAT.

"FURTHERMORE, AFTER-HOURS SECURITY-CARDS ARE NEEDED TO TAKE ELEVATORS TO KEY FLOORS, AND TO UNLOCK CERTAIN DOORS -- BOTH OF WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN NECESSARY TO GAIN ACCESS TO DOMINIQUE."

WE ALL KNOW IT'S AN INSIDE JOB. THE COPS DO, TOO -- WON'T TAKE YOUR FRIEND RAFE VALER LONG TO PICK UP ON THIS TRAIL, EITHER...

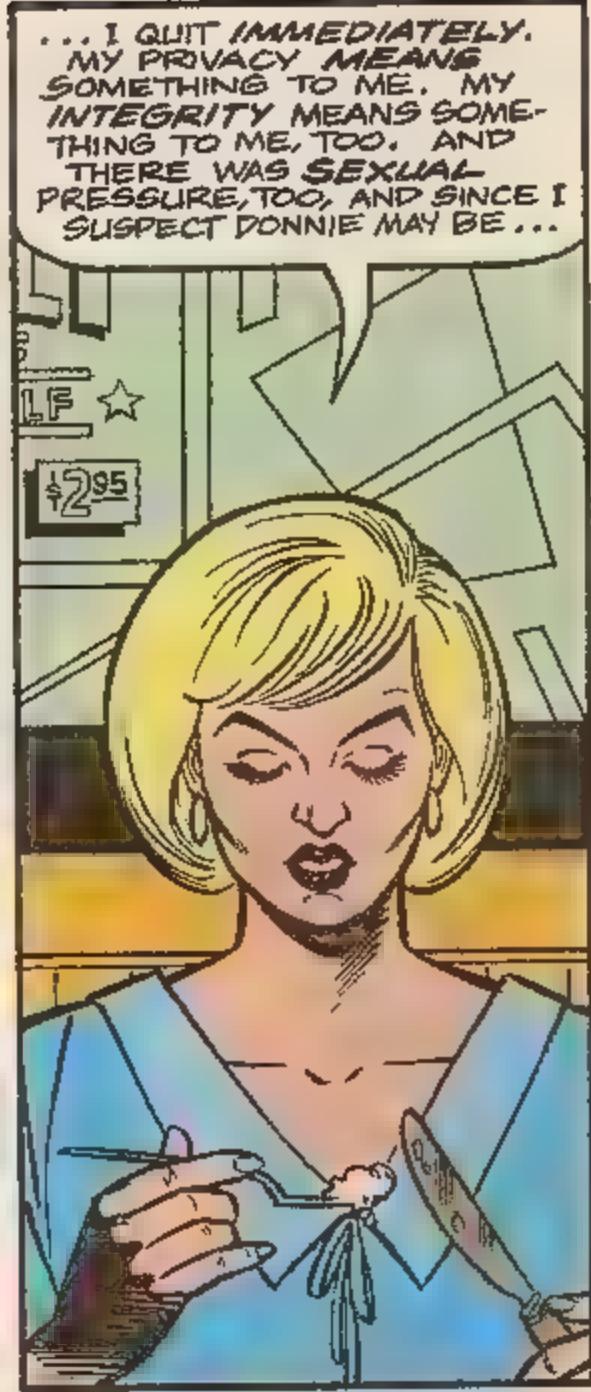
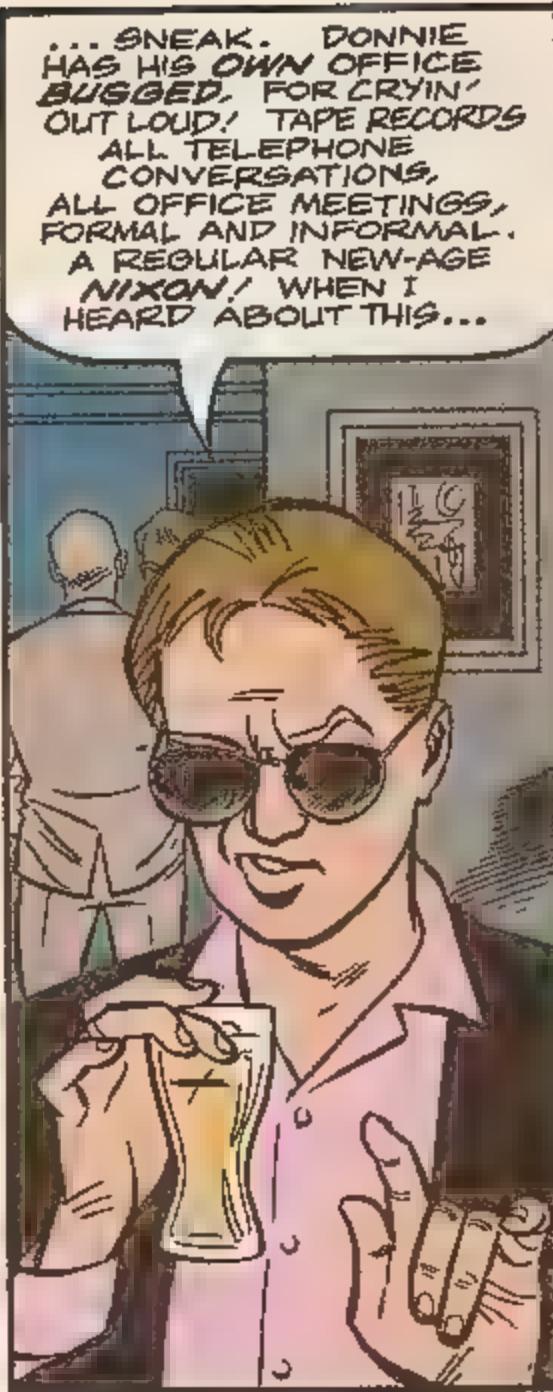
WELL, COOPERATE WITH HIM -- BUT SLOWLY. I'M GOING TO BE OUT IN THE FIELD QUESTIONING THESE DISGRUNTLED FORMER MUERTA EMPLOYEES...

• TO SEE IF ANY OF 'EM HAVE A KILL-SIZE GRUDGE . . ."

I WALKED 'CAUSE I DIDN'T LIKE THE MENTALITY OF MUERTA ENTERPRISES. SPECIFICALLY DONNIE MUERTA, WHO IS A YUPPIE FROM HELL, FAR AS I'M CONCERNED --A PONY-TAILED . . .

... SNEAK. DONNIE HAS HIS OWN OFFICE BUGGED, FOR CRYIN' OUT LOUD! TAPE RECORDS ALL TELEPHONE CONVERSATIONS, ALL OFFICE MEETINGS, FORMAL AND INFORMAL. A REGULAR NEW-AGE NIXON! WHEN I HEARD ABOUT THIS . . .

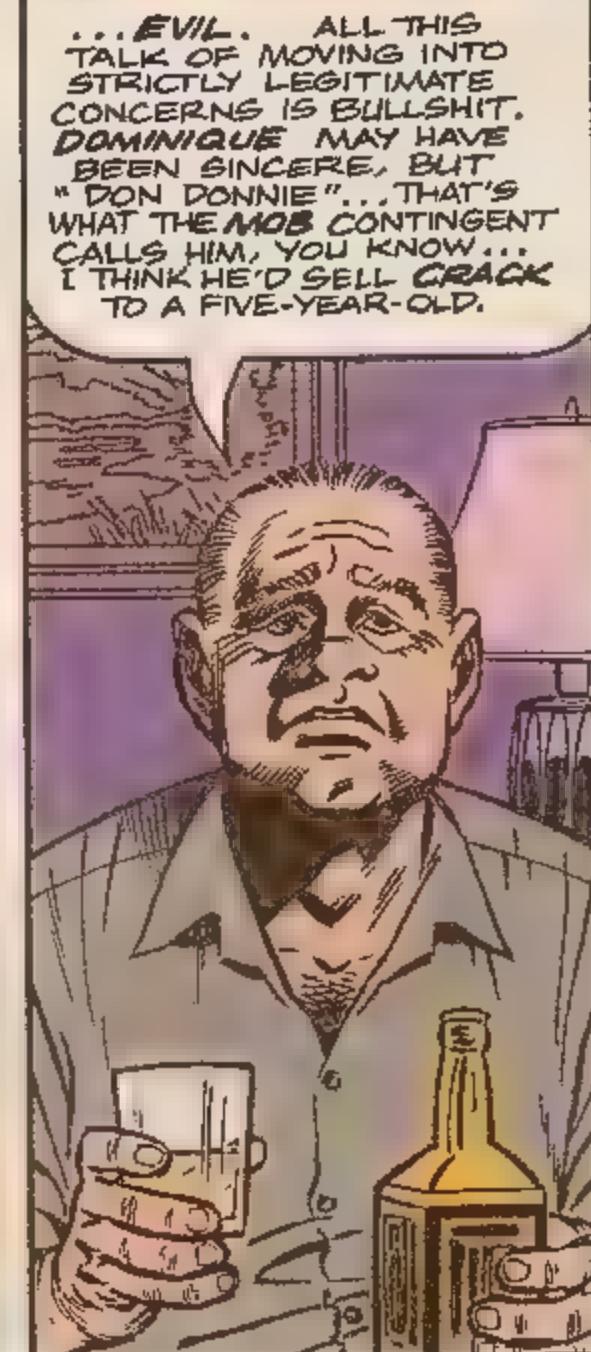
... I QUIT IMMEDIATELY. MY PRIVACY MEANS SOMETHING TO ME. MY INTEGRITY MEANS SOMETHING TO ME, TOO. AND THERE WAS SEXUAL PRESSURE, TOO, AND SINCE I SUSPECT DONNIE MAY BE . . .



... BISEXUAL, AND IN THESE DAYS OF AIDS, CAN'T BE TOO CAREFUL. OH, I COULD HAVE FILED AGAINST HIM, BUT BEHIND ALL THAT GLASS AND STEEL, MUERTA ENTERPRISES IS STILL . . .

... THE MOB. FINALLY, THE GUILT GOT TO ME, FRANKLY. NOTHING I DID PERSONALLY HAD ANY CONNECTION WITH ANYTHING REMOTELY ILLEGAL. BUT I STILL HAD A SENSE OF DOING SOMETHING WRONG, SOMETHING . . .

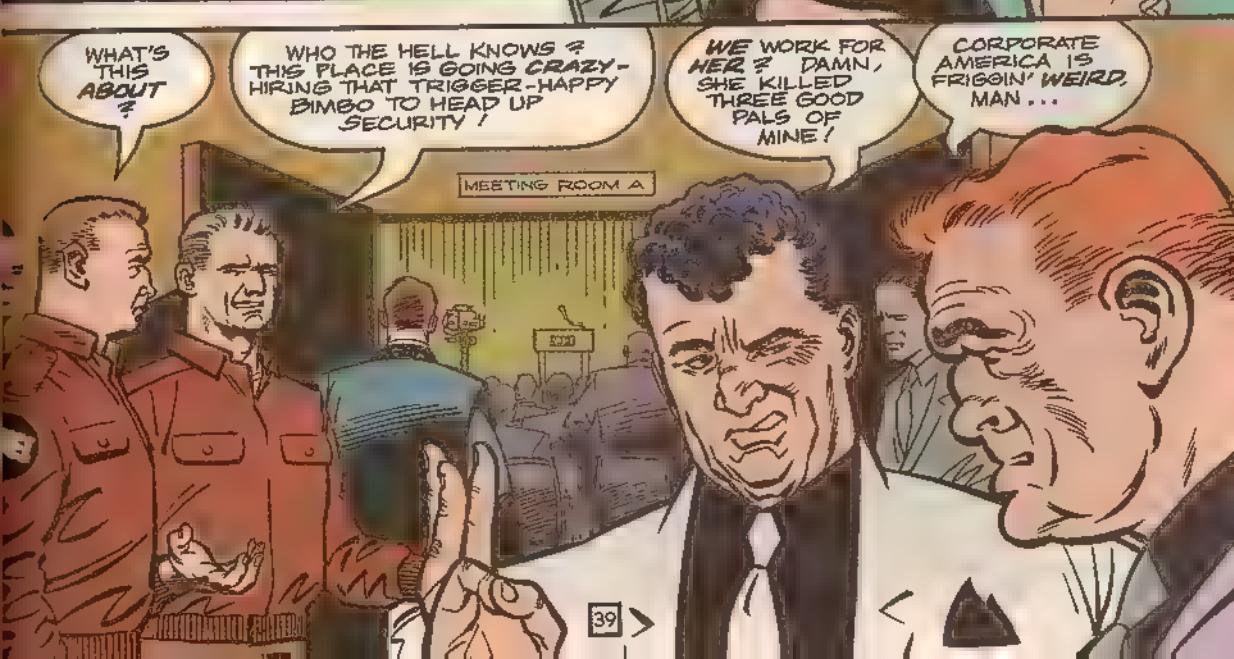
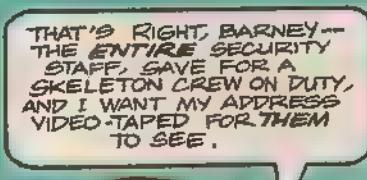
... EVIL. ALL THIS TALK OF MOVING INTO STRICTLY LEGITIMATE CONCERNS IS BULLSHIT. DOMINIQUE MAY HAVE BEEN SINCERE, BUT "DON DONNIE" . . . THAT'S WHAT THE MOB CONTINGENT CALLS HIM, YOU KNOW . . . I THINK HE'D SELL CRACK TO A FIVE-YEAR-OLD.



THEY'D ALL BEEN FRANK WITH ME, THE FORMER MUERTA EMPLOYEES; BUT THEN I HADN'T MENTIONED I WAS WORKING FOR THE MUERTAS. THEY ALL KNEW WHO I WAS, AND FIGURED I WAS TRYING TO CLEAR MYSELF.

BUT I HADN'T TURNED UP ANY GOOD SUSPECTS. NOBODY SEEMED TO HAVE A LARGE ENOUGH HATE-ON TO SEND DOMINIQUE MUERTA TO HER UNTIMELY IF JUST REWARD.





I THINK YOU ALL KNOW WHO I AM. AND I'M SURE YOU KNOW THAT, FOR THE PAST SEVERAL DAYS, I'VE BEEN YOUR NEW CHIEF OF SECURITY. YOU'RE WONDERING, I'M SURE, WHAT CHANGES WILL BE GOING DOWN ...

BUT I'M STILL STUDYING THE SECURITY SITUATION HERE, AND AM NOT READY TO INSTITUTE ANY MAJOR ALTERATIONS IN THE STATUS QUO... AND YOU WILL CONTINUE TO REPORT TO, AND DEAL WITH, MR. PHILLIPS AS IN THE PAST.

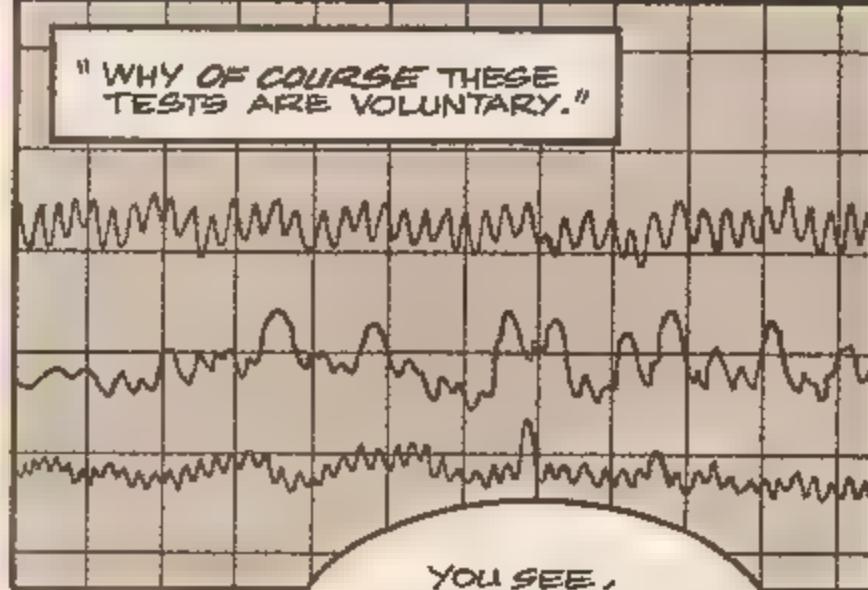
I DO WANT TO ANNOUNCE THAT EVERYONE IN THIS BUILDING -- BEGINNING WITH THE PEOPLE IN THIS ROOM -- WILL BE TAKING POLYGRAPH TESTS REGARDING THE MURDER OF DOMINIQUE MUERTA.



ARE THESE TESTS VOLUNTARY? WE GOT CERTAIN RIGHTS, YOU KNOW!

YEAH!

"WHY OF COURSE THESE TESTS ARE VOLUNTARY."



YOU SEE, I'M PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN FINDING OUT WHO DOESN'T WANT TO TAKE A LIE-DETECTOR TEST.



IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR MY "PEP" TALK TO GET RESULTS...

YOU WANTED TO FLUSH OUT THE GUILTY PARTIES WITH YOUR LIE-DETECTOR THREAT --

IT'S NO THREAT, BARNEY.

WELL, YOU MAY NOT HAVE TO BOTHER GOING THROUGH WITH IT. I'VE BEEN APPROACHED BY AN M.E.I. EMPLOYEE WHO WANTS TO MEET WITH YOU, ONE-ON-ONE.

FOR THE PURPOSE OF... CONFESSING?

OR POINTING A FINGER. EITHER WAY, YOUR TACTIC WORKED...

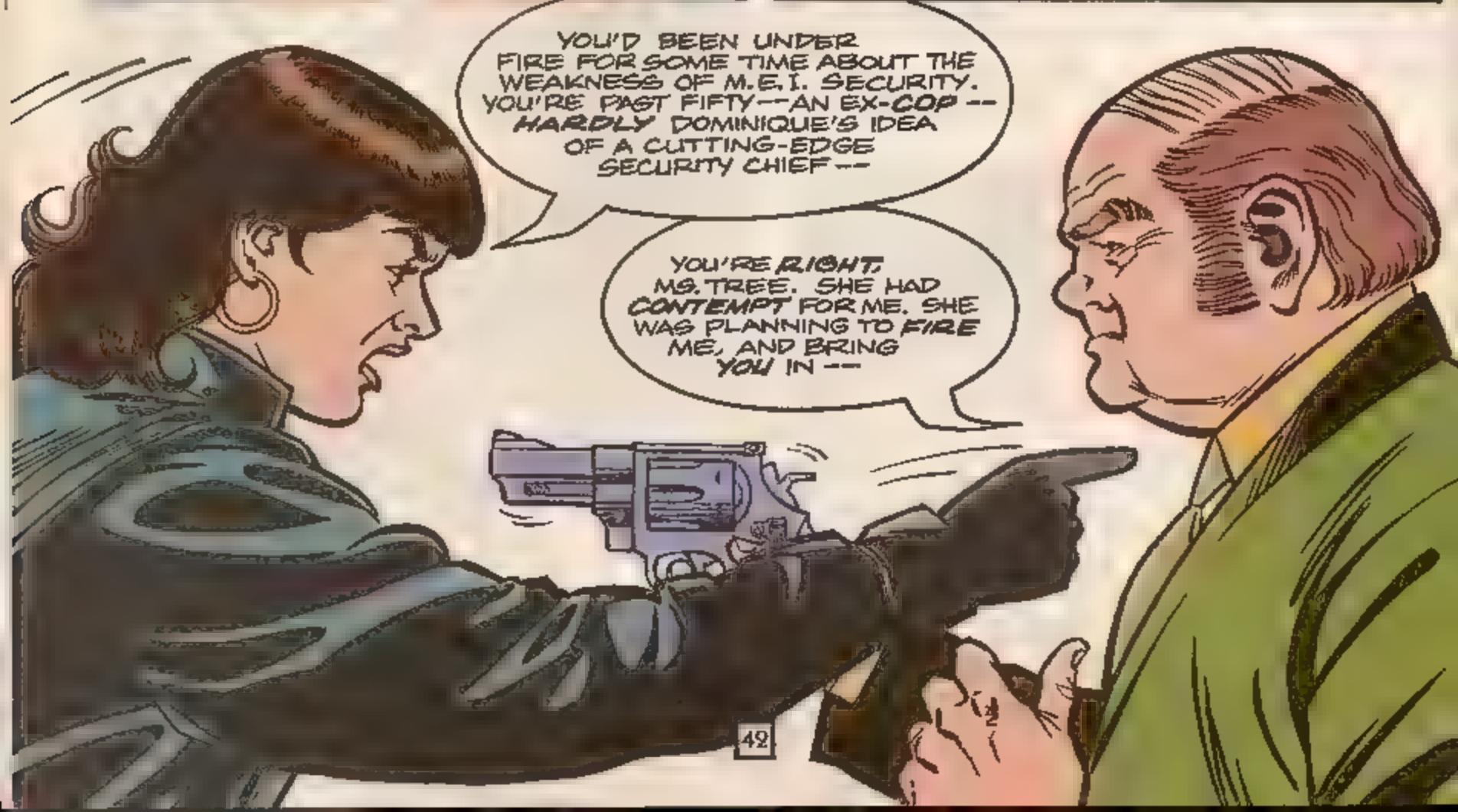
YOU'VE BROUGHT A SUSPECT... OR AT LEAST AN INFORMER... OUT INTO THE OPEN.

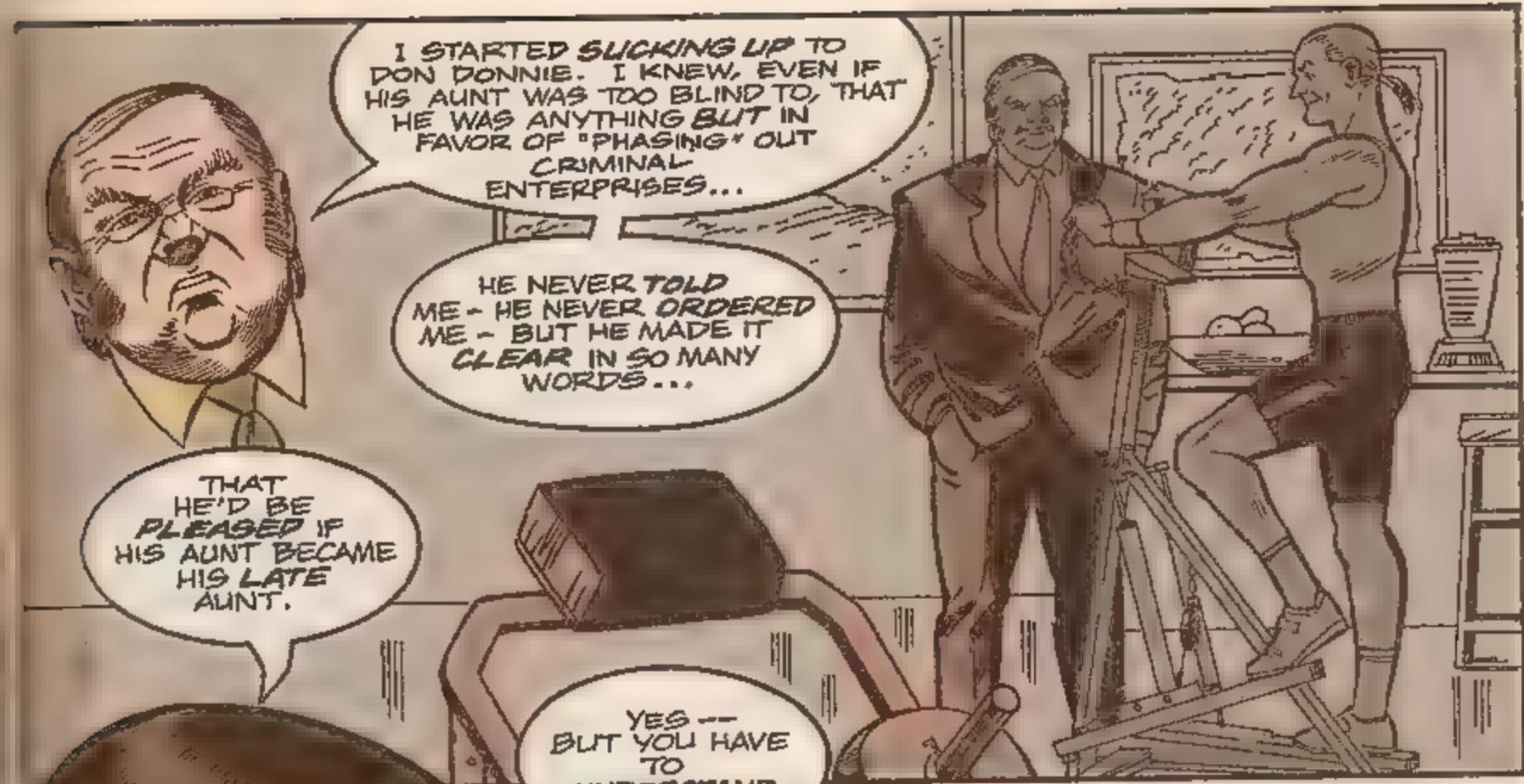
WELL," BARNEY SAID, "RELATIVELY OUT INTO THE OPEN -- THE EMPLOYEE WANTS A MIDNIGHT MEET, JUST YOU AND HIM, IN THE UNDERGROUND PARKING GARAGE."

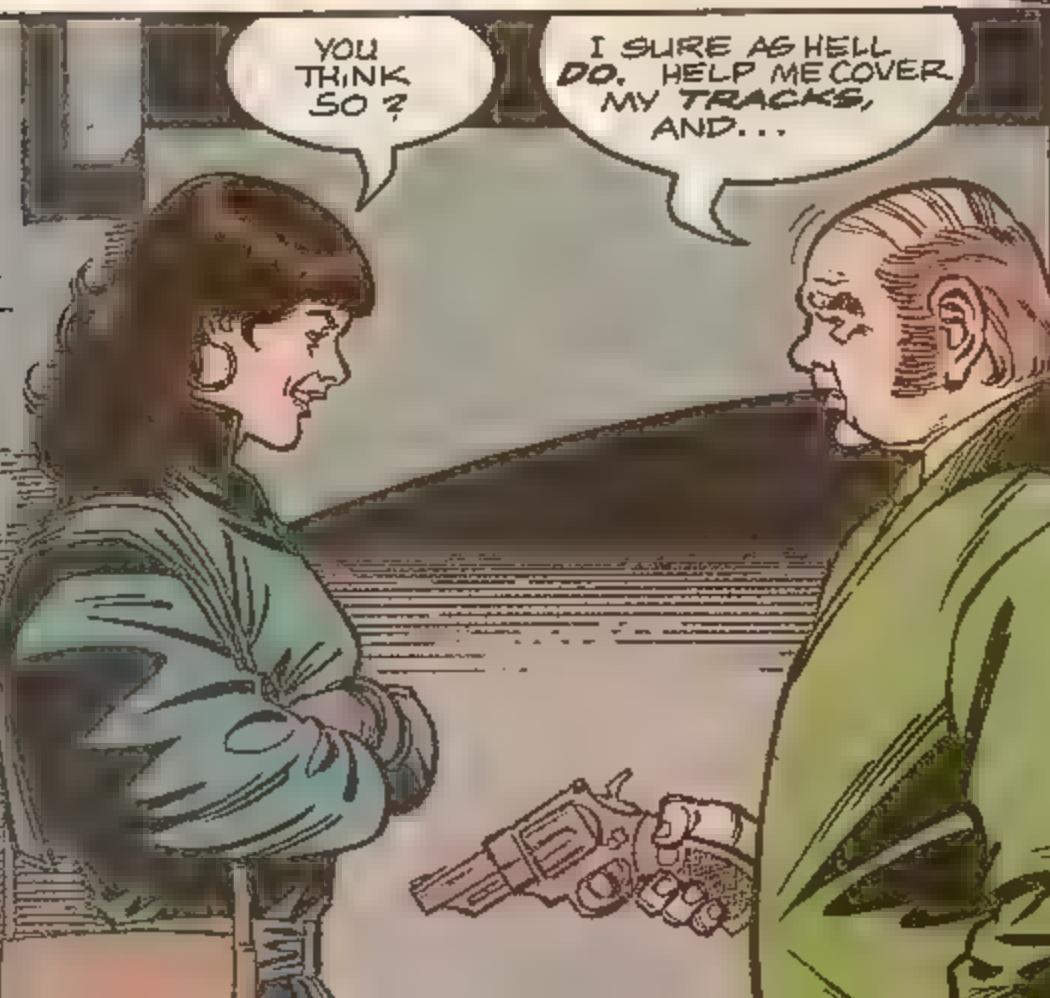
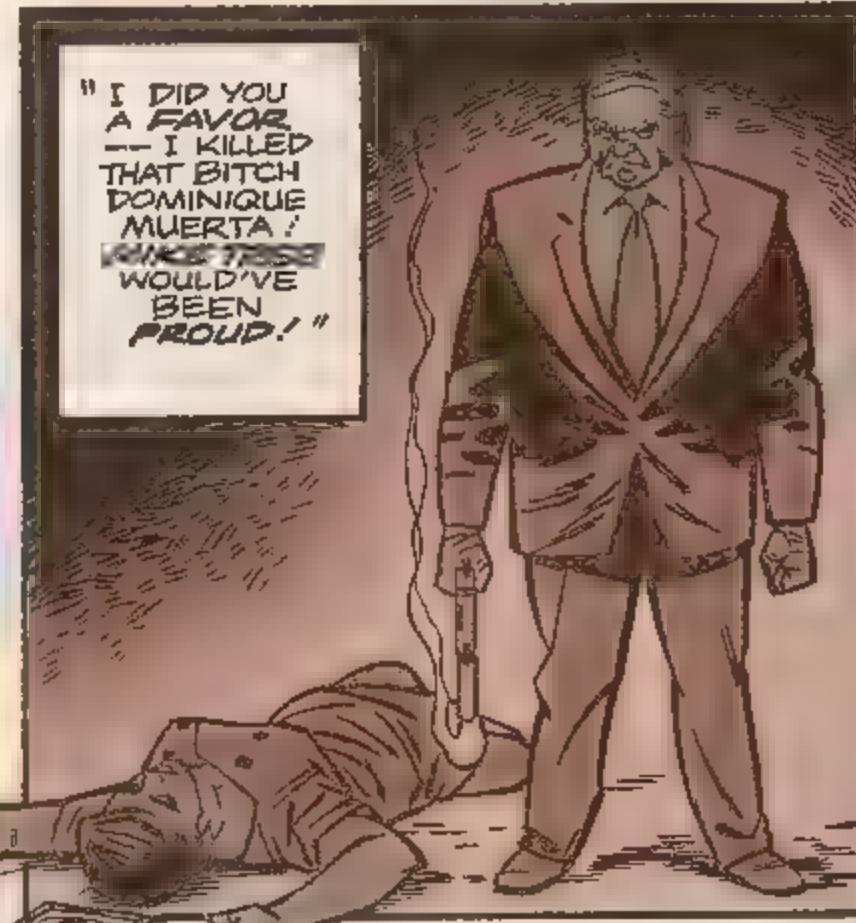
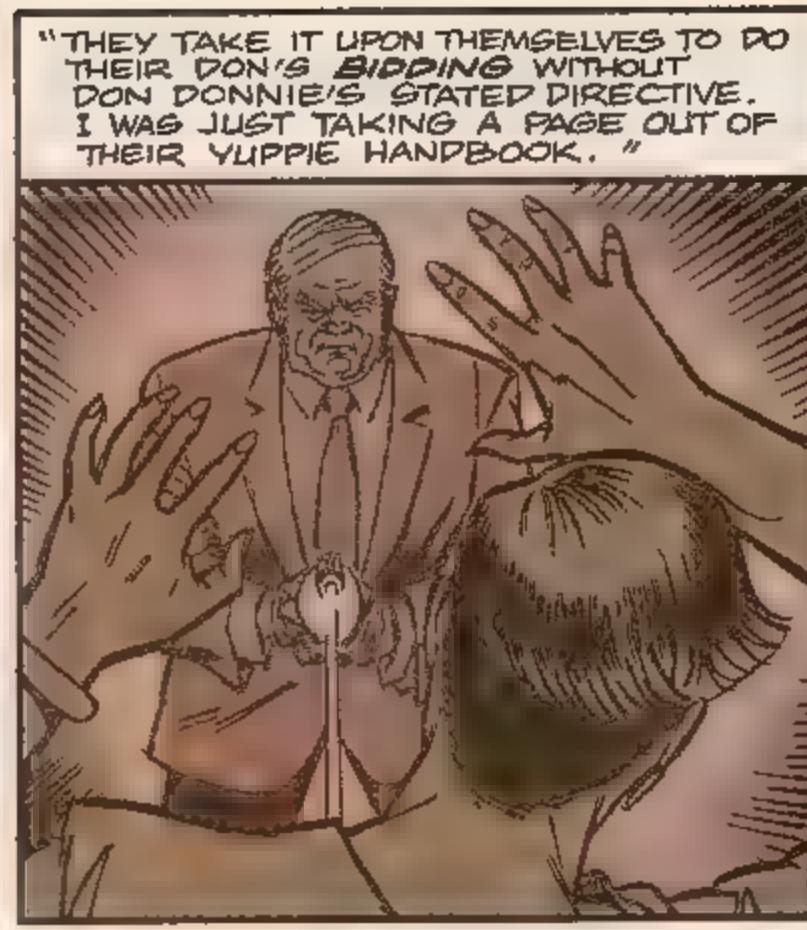
"DEEP THROAT" LIVES

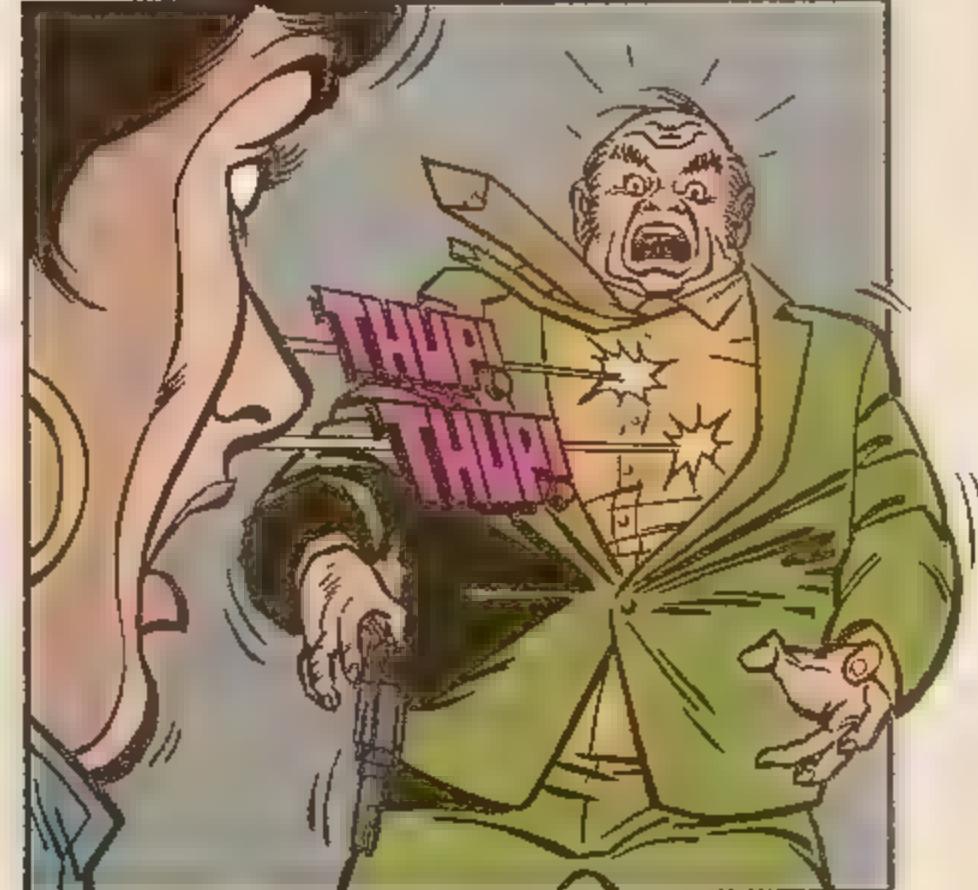
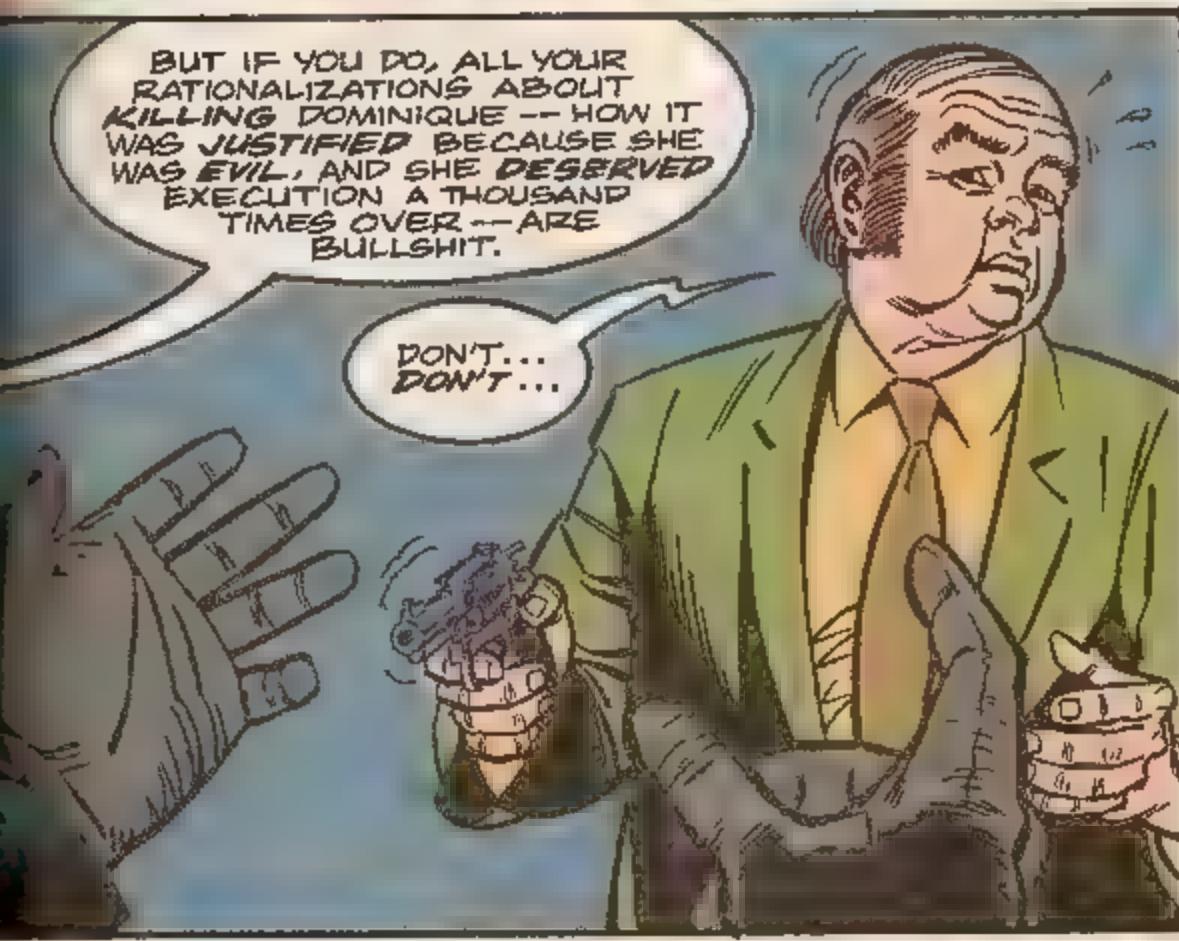
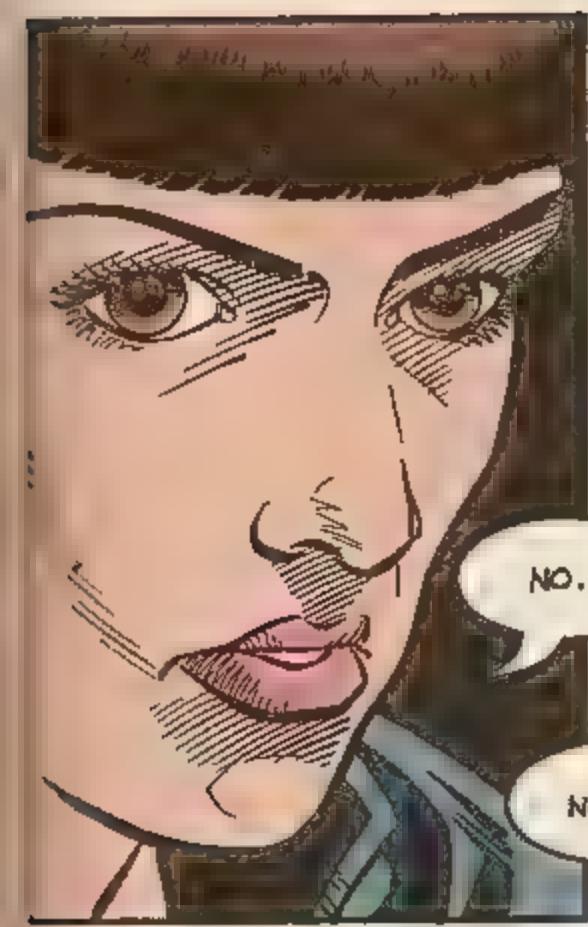
BARNEY! YOU KNOW I'M SUPPOSED TO BE HERE ALONE.

YES -- BUT I'M AFRAID OF A TRAP. I'D BETTER BACK YOU UP --













PLEASE YOU!

I NEVER TOLD HIM TO SHOOT BARNEY PHILLIPS.

YOU JUST LET HIM KNOW, "IN SO MANY WORDS." THE SAME WAY YOU SENT BARNEY TOWARD YOUR AUNT LIKE A GUIDED MISSILE!

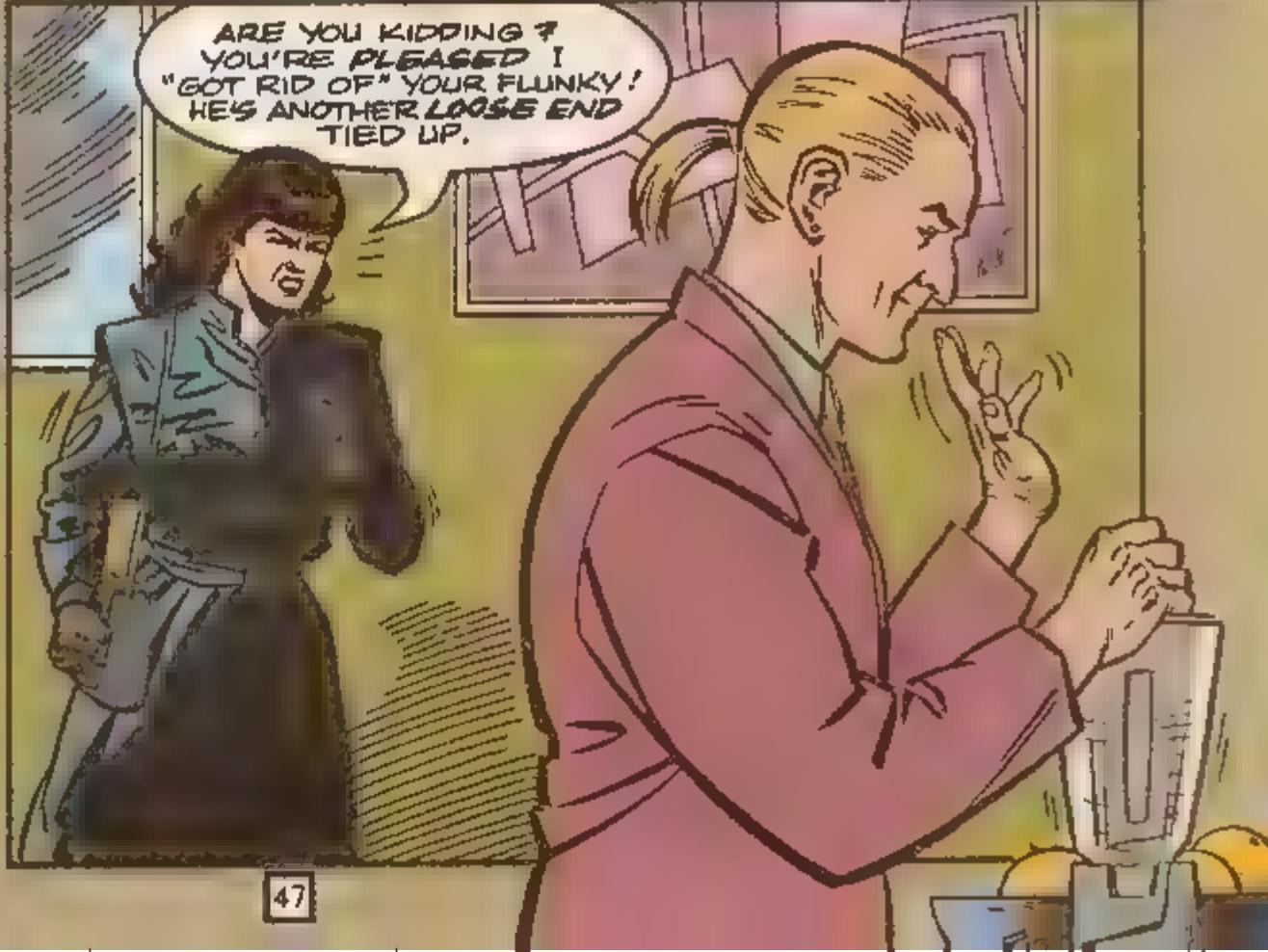
BARNEY OVERSTEPPED HIS BOUNDS! HE WAS NOT FOLLOWING MY WISHES WHEN HE GOT RID OF MY AUNT.



THAT'S WHY MY MAN GOT RID OF BARNEY -- OR SO I CAN ONLY SURMISE.

CAREFUL. THE TAPES ARE RUNNING --

TOO BAD YOU OVER-REACTIONED AND SHOT POOR EUGENE," DONNIE SAID. "HE WAS JUST TRYING TO BE YOUR PROTECTOR."



ARE YOU KIDDING? YOU'RE PLEASED I "GOT RID OF" YOUR FLUNKY! HE'S ANOTHER LOOSE END TIED UP.

YOU'RE A REAL
PIECE OF WORK,
DONNIE -- A SNAKE
WITH AN M. B. A. --
ONLY YOU LET
OTHERS DO YOUR
BITING FOR YOU.

IT WORKED OUT.
DIDN'T IT? MY
AUNT IS DEAD, BUT
YOU'RE CLEARED
OF HER MURDER,
AND THE KILLER
IS TOAST. THAT'S
MY LITTLE
PRESENT TO YOU.
A JOB PERK....

I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I TOLD YOUR AUNT:
I DO MY OWN KILLING, THANK YOU.
YOU'VE JUST GONE TO THE HEAD OF MY
PERSONAL SHIT LIST. YOU PAMPERED
LITTLE BASTARD.



"VIOLENCE AND DEATH ARE ABSTRACTIONS
TO YOU, UP HERE IN YOUR GLASS TOWER.
BUT ONE OF THESE DAYS I'M GOING TO TEACH
YOU WHAT VIOLENCE AND DEATH ARE ALL
ABOUT -- UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL!"



THE
END



MONDIGHT

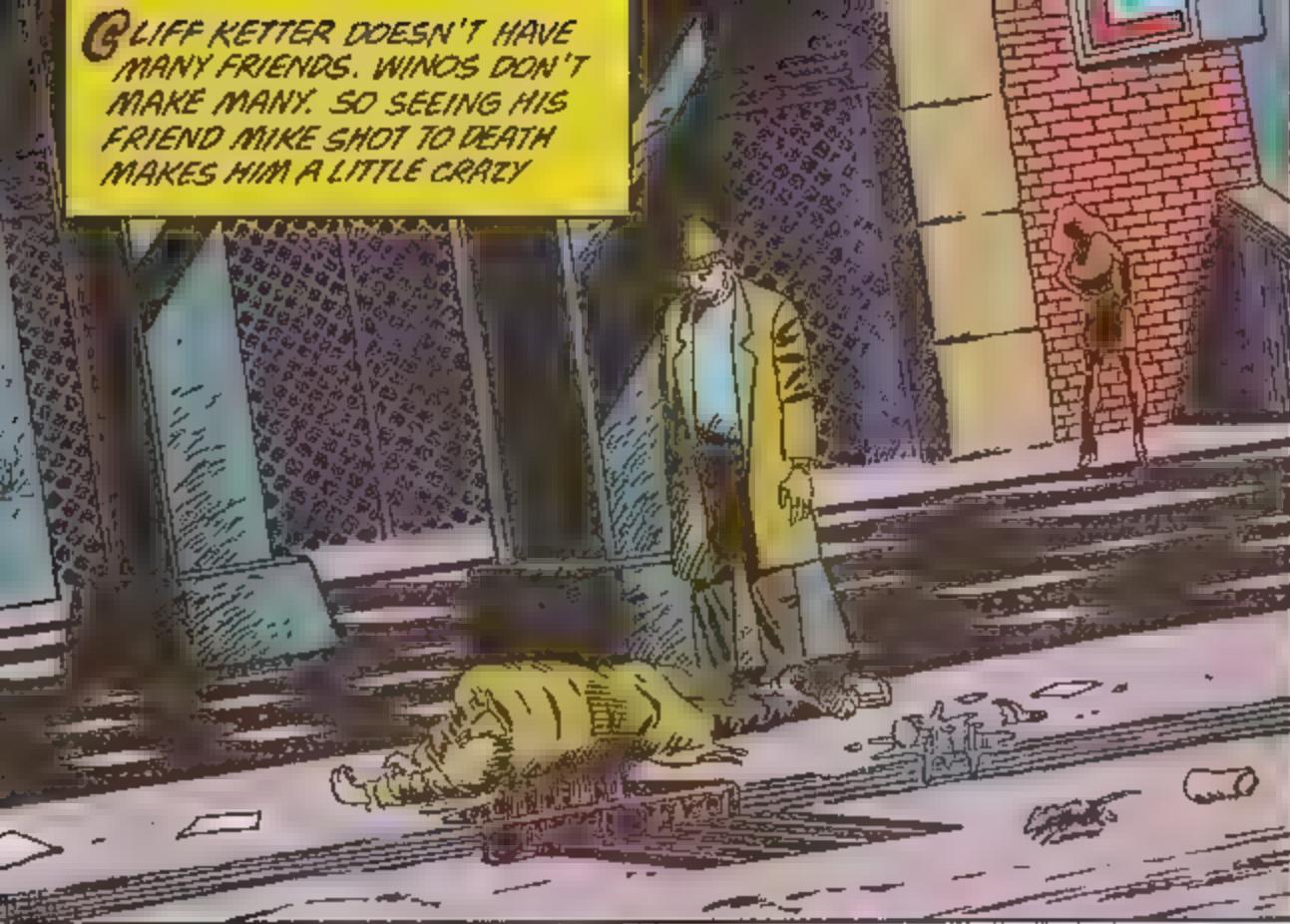
WELCOME TO THE DEAD ZONE, THAT PART OF THE CITY NOBODY WANTS TO HEAR ABOUT. SLUM IS THE POLITE WORD. IN TWO MONTHS, SIX DERELICTS HAVE BEEN MURDERED, DRIVE-BY STYLE.

Nobody knows who,
nobody knows why.

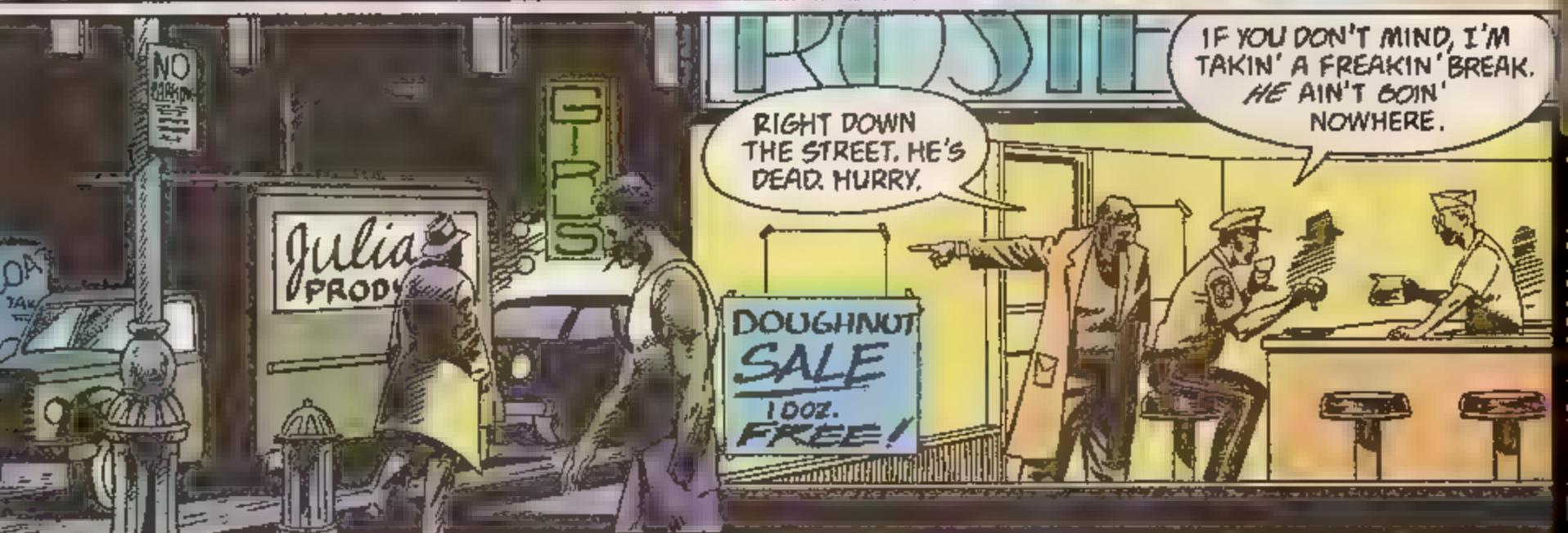
ED GORMAN
Story
GRAHAM NOLAN
Art
JOHN COSTANZA
Letters
SAM PARSONS
Mike Gold
Editing

And the cops don't
give much of a damn.

CLIFF KETTER DOESN'T HAVE MANY FRIENDS. WINOS DON'T MAKE MANY. SO SEEING HIS FRIEND MIKE SHOT TO DEATH MAKES HIM A LITTLE CRAZY



I'M GONNA FIND THE FREAKIN' GEEK WHO DID THIS TO YOU, MIKE. I PROMISE.

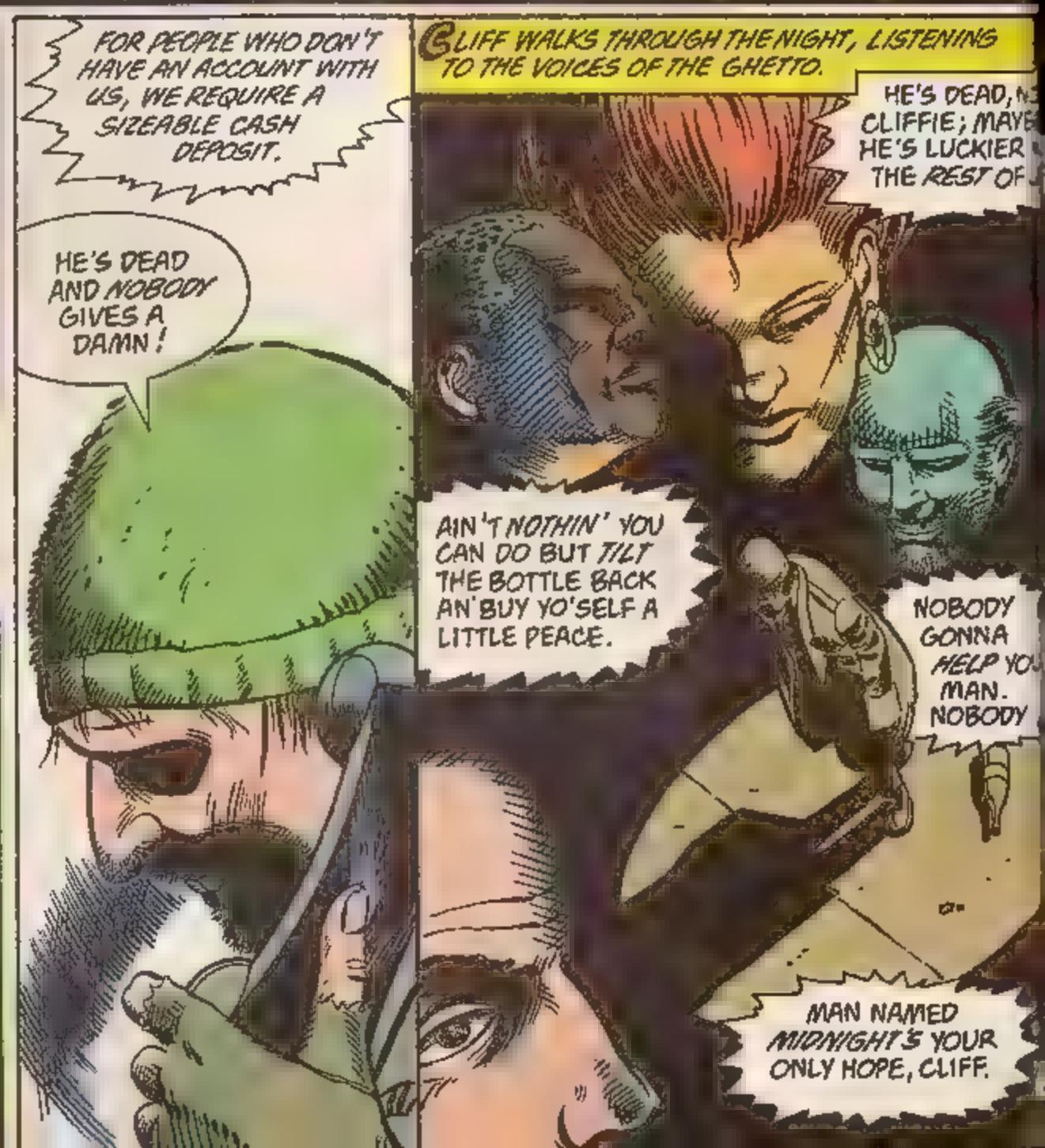


IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'M TAKIN' A FREAKIN' BREAK. HE AIN'T GOIN' NOWHERE.



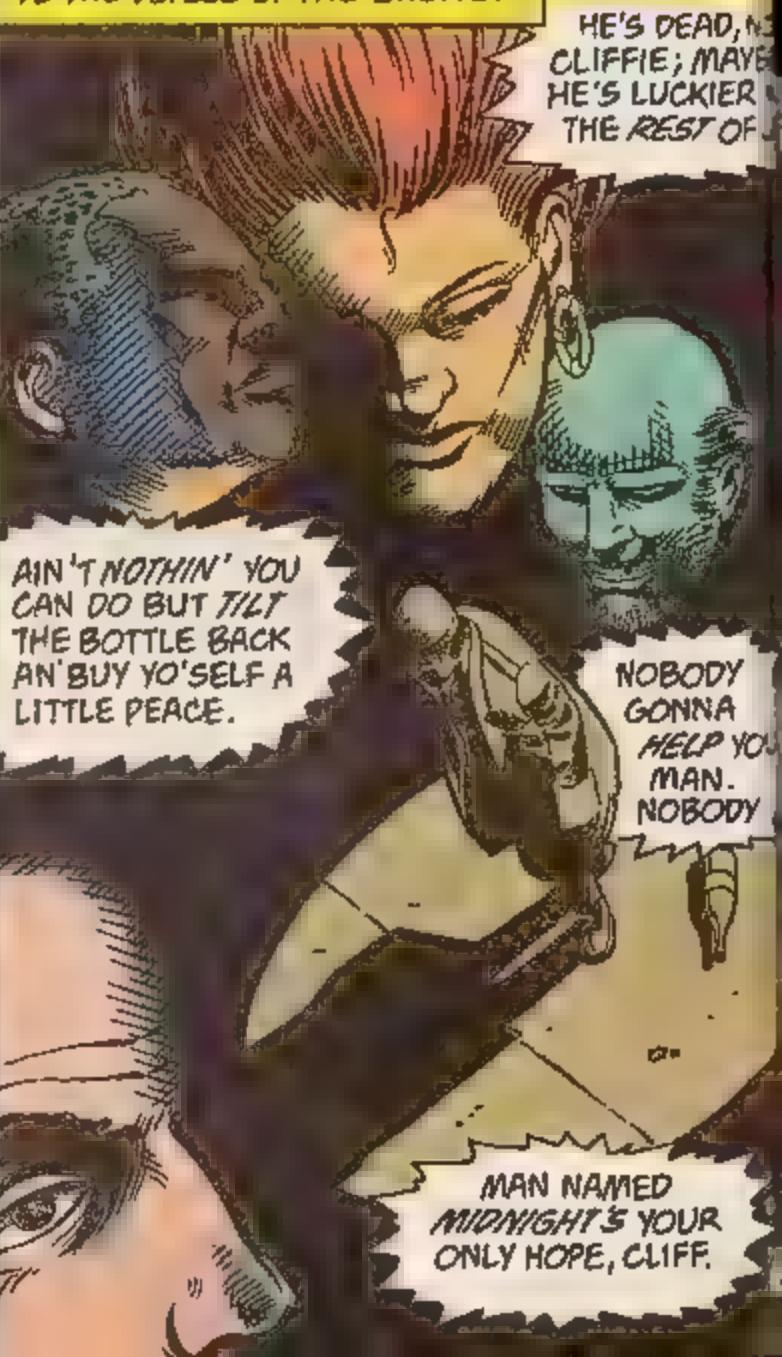
FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T HAVE AN ACCOUNT WITH US, WE REQUIRE A SIZEABLE CASH DEPOSIT.

HE'S DEAD AND NOBODY GIVES A DAMN!



CLIFF WALKS THROUGH THE NIGHT, LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF THE GHETTO.

HE'S DEAD, N CLIFFIE; MAYBE HE'S LUCKIER THE REST OF



AIN'T NOTHIN' YOU CAN DO BUT TILT THE BOTTLE BACK AN' BUY YO'SELF A LITTLE PEACE.

NOBODY GONNA HELP YOU MAN. NOBODY

MAN NAMED MIDNIGHT'S YOUR ONLY HOPE, CLIFF.



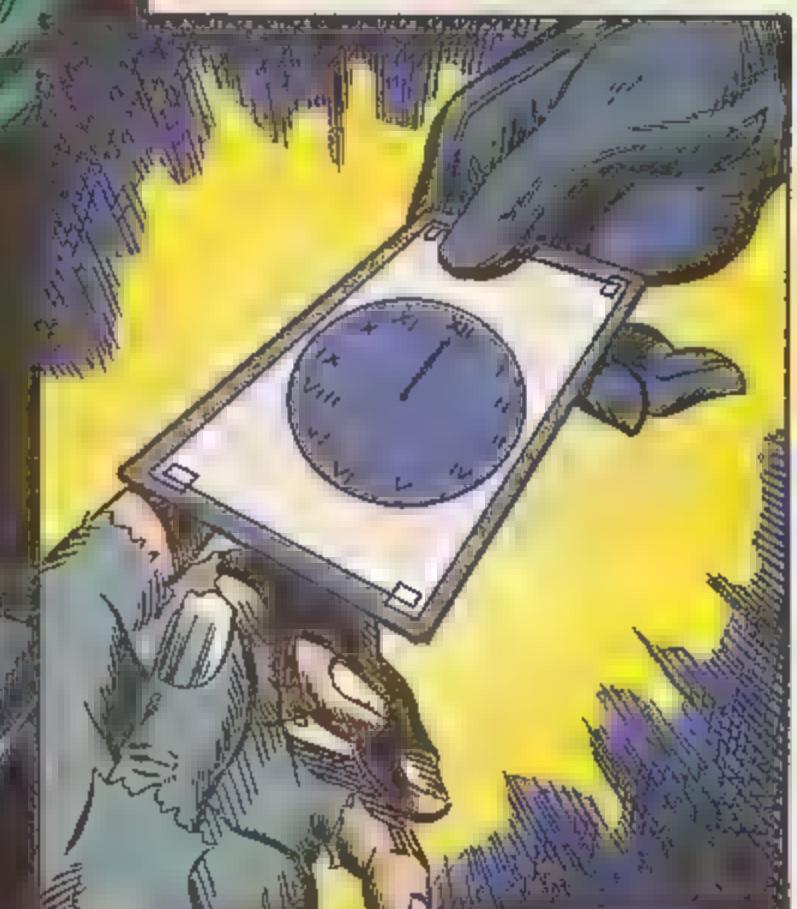
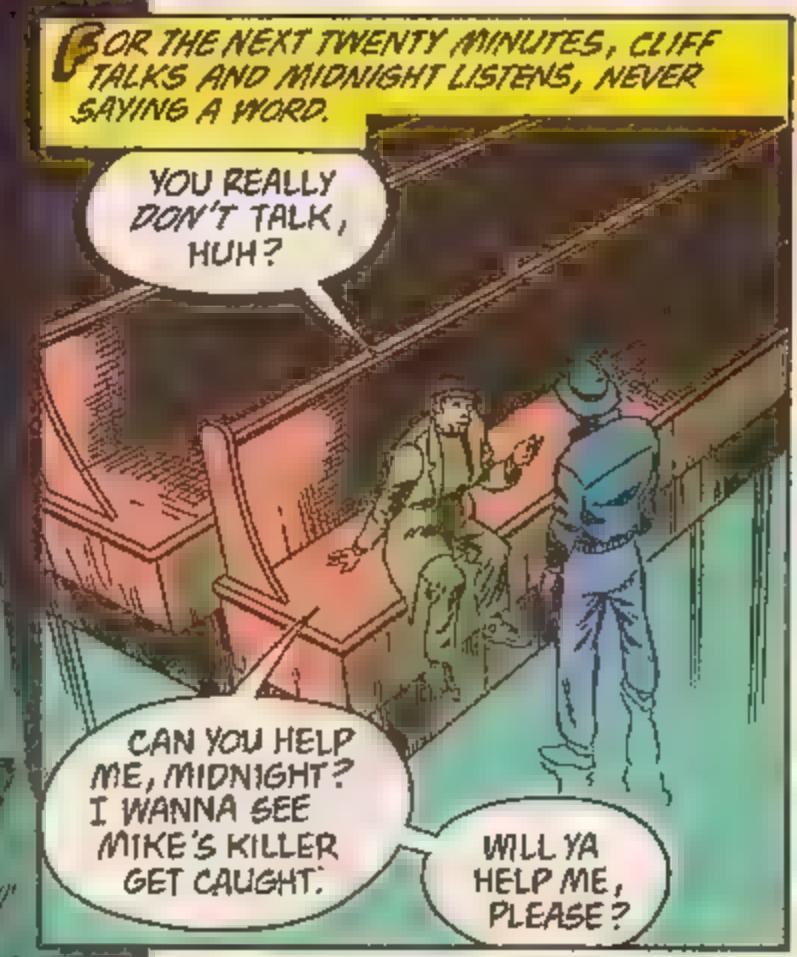
... AND YOU LIGHT THE ONLY YELLOW CANDLE.
AND THEN -- ACCORDING TO WHAT I HEARD --

-- THE FOLLOWING MIDNIGHT, HE'LL
APPEAR. THEY SAY HE NEVER TALKS.
IF HE AGREES TO HELP, HE'LL JUST
GIVE YOU HIS BUSINESS CARD --



HAVING DONE WHAT THE SHOPKEEPER
TOLD HIM, KETTER NOW RETURNS TO
THE CHURCH NEXT MIDNIGHT TO SEE IF --



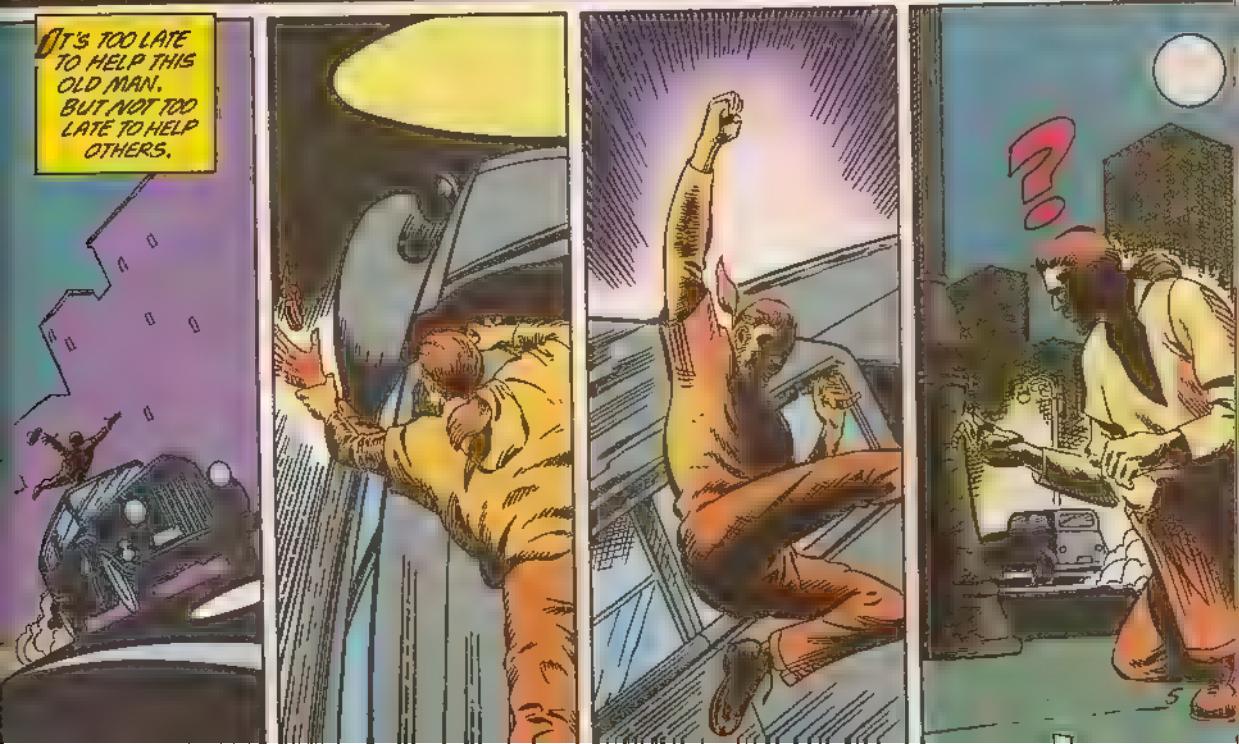


AS ALWAYS, IN DISGUISE, MIDNIGHT SPENDS THE NEXT THREE NIGHTS IN THE GHETTO WATCHING FOR ANY SIGN OF DRIVE-BY KILLINGS.



BUT HE FINDS NOTHING UNTIL LATE ON THE THIRD NIGHT--





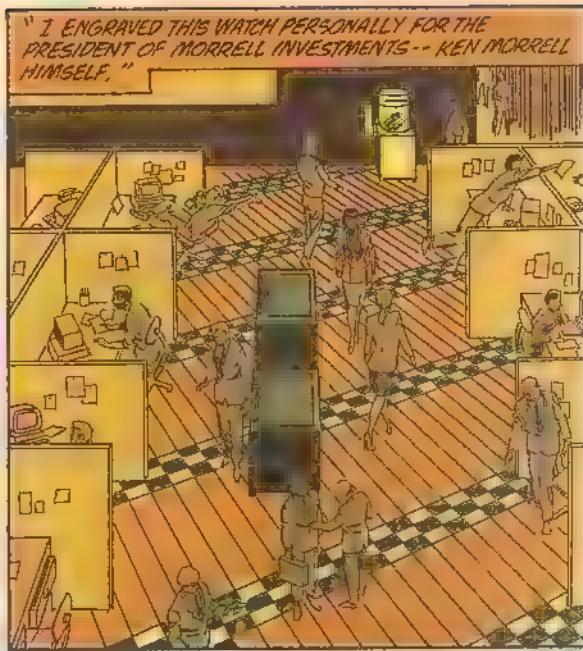
GATER

MUCH TO DO BEFORE SLEEP TONIGHT...

AS MIDNIGHT TOLLS, THE MYSTERIOUS, LONE MAN CONTEMPLATES WHAT HE'S LEARNED.

BUT THE WATCH BEARS A MOST CURIOUS INSCRIPTION...

"BILLIONAIRES HAVE PLENTY OF FUN."



KEN MORRELL. THE COMMUNITY IS IN AWE
OF HIM AN INVESTMENT BROKER WHO
MADE HIS FIRST BILLION BEFORE AGE
THIRTY.

CATER THAT EVENING...



I'M NOT SURE I
CAN DO IT, KEN

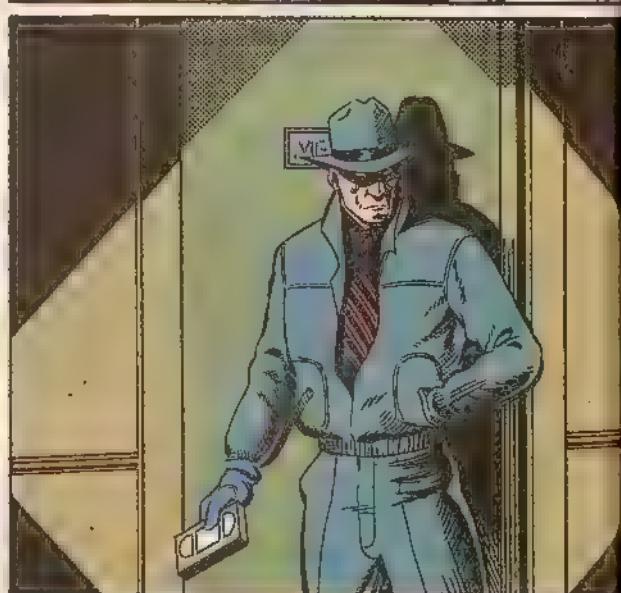
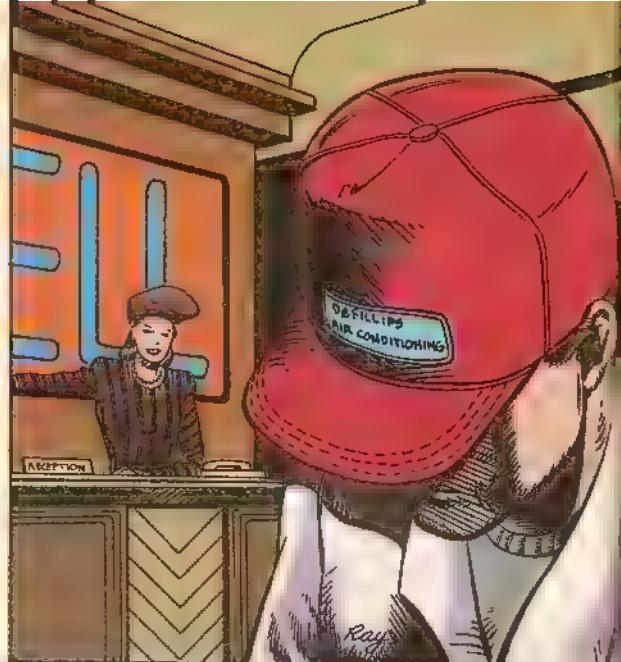
POOR
BABY,

MAYBE YOU SHOULD
HAVE BEEN A HAIR-
DRESSER, JENNINGS

WHEN YOU'RE DONE WITH YOUR
AMUSEMENTS, GENTLEMEN, LET'S
TALK ABOUT JENNINGS OFFING
THE NEXT DERELICT

OH, HE'LL DO IT OTHERWISE
HE WON'T GET HIS BONUS
THIS YEAR.

THE LOBBY OF THE MORRELL BUILDING -
AN AIR CONDITIONING REPAIRMAN WHO
LOOKS CURIOUSLY FAMILIAR...



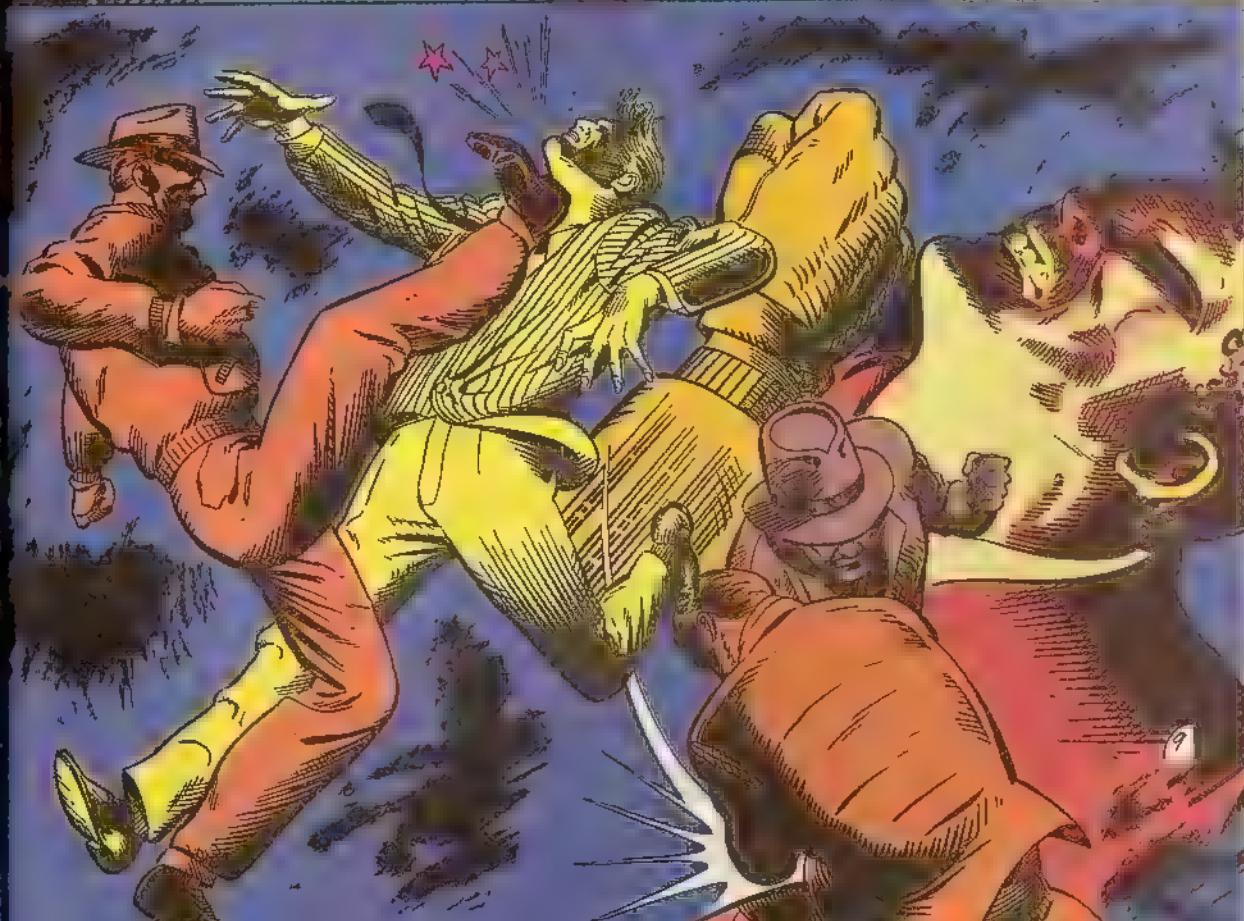
KEN'S RIGHT, JENNINGS. EACH OF US AGREED TO DISGUISE OURSELVES AND GO DOWN TO WINOVILLE AND KILL A DERELICT. THAT'S YOUR INITIATION INTO THE BILLIONAIRE'S BACHELOR CLUB. YOU EITHER DO IT OR YOU'RE NOT IN THE CLUB.



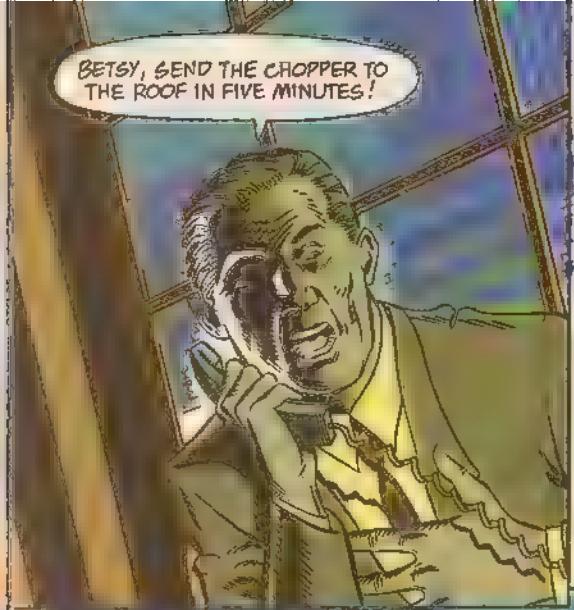
MORRELL'S ARM IS READY TO BREAK IN HALF.



UH OH.

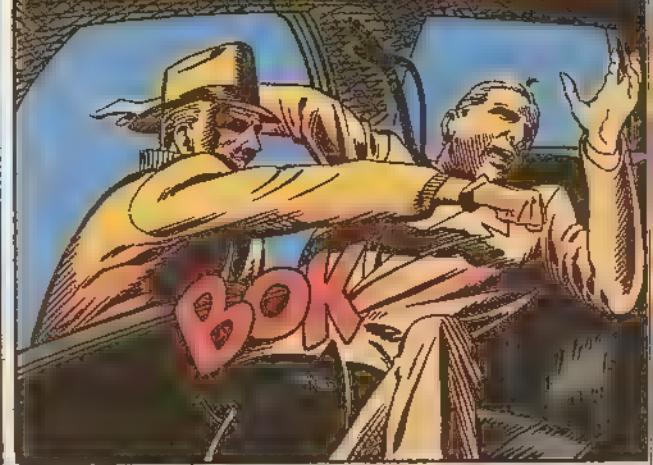


BETSY, SEND THE CHOPPER TO THE ROOF IN FIVE MINUTES!



YOU DO JUST WHAT I TELL YOU. YOU UNDERSTAND, CRETIN?



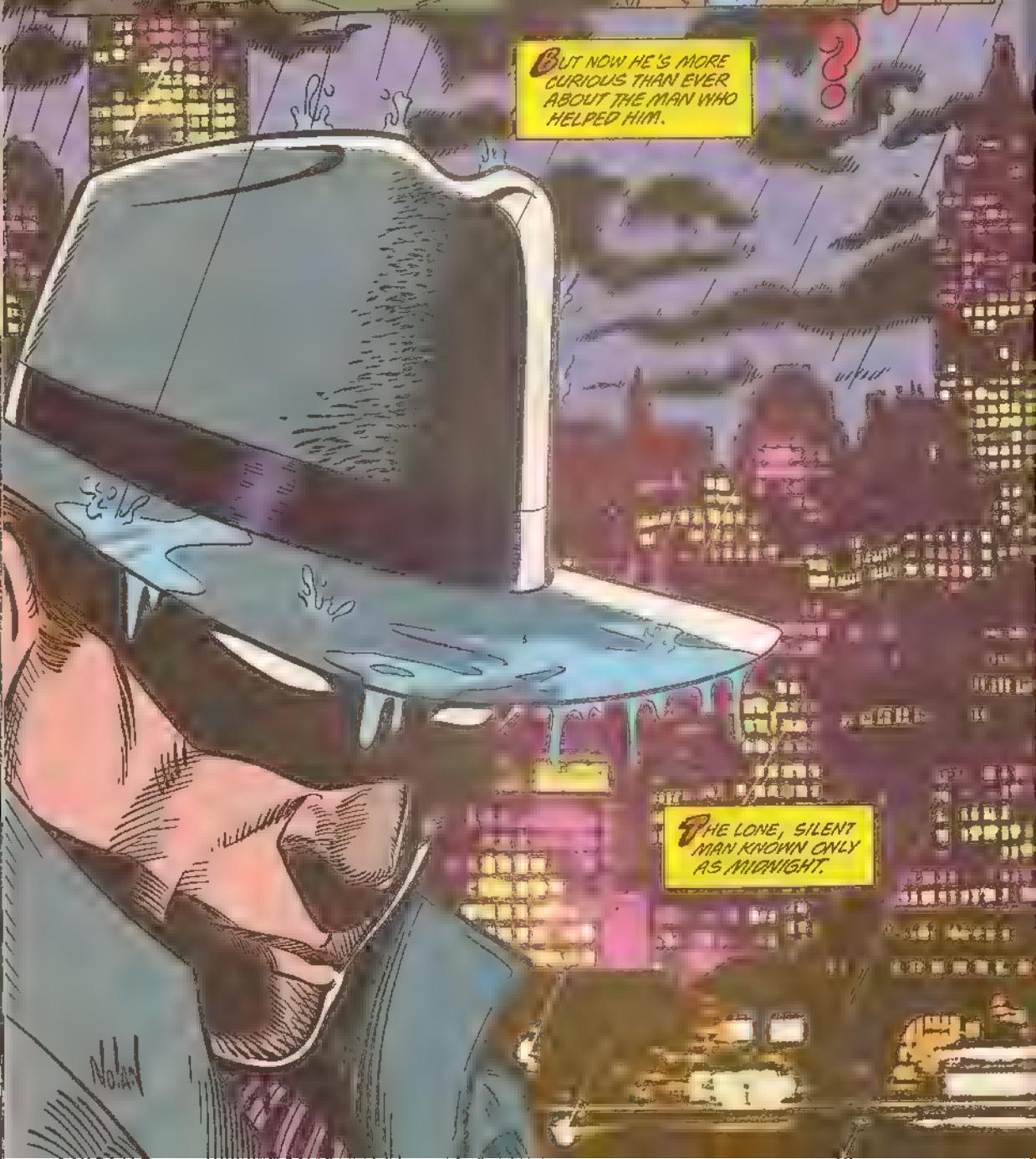


GUESS IF YOU FOLKS
DON'T MIND, I'LL GET
ME SOME NEW
FOOTWEAR.

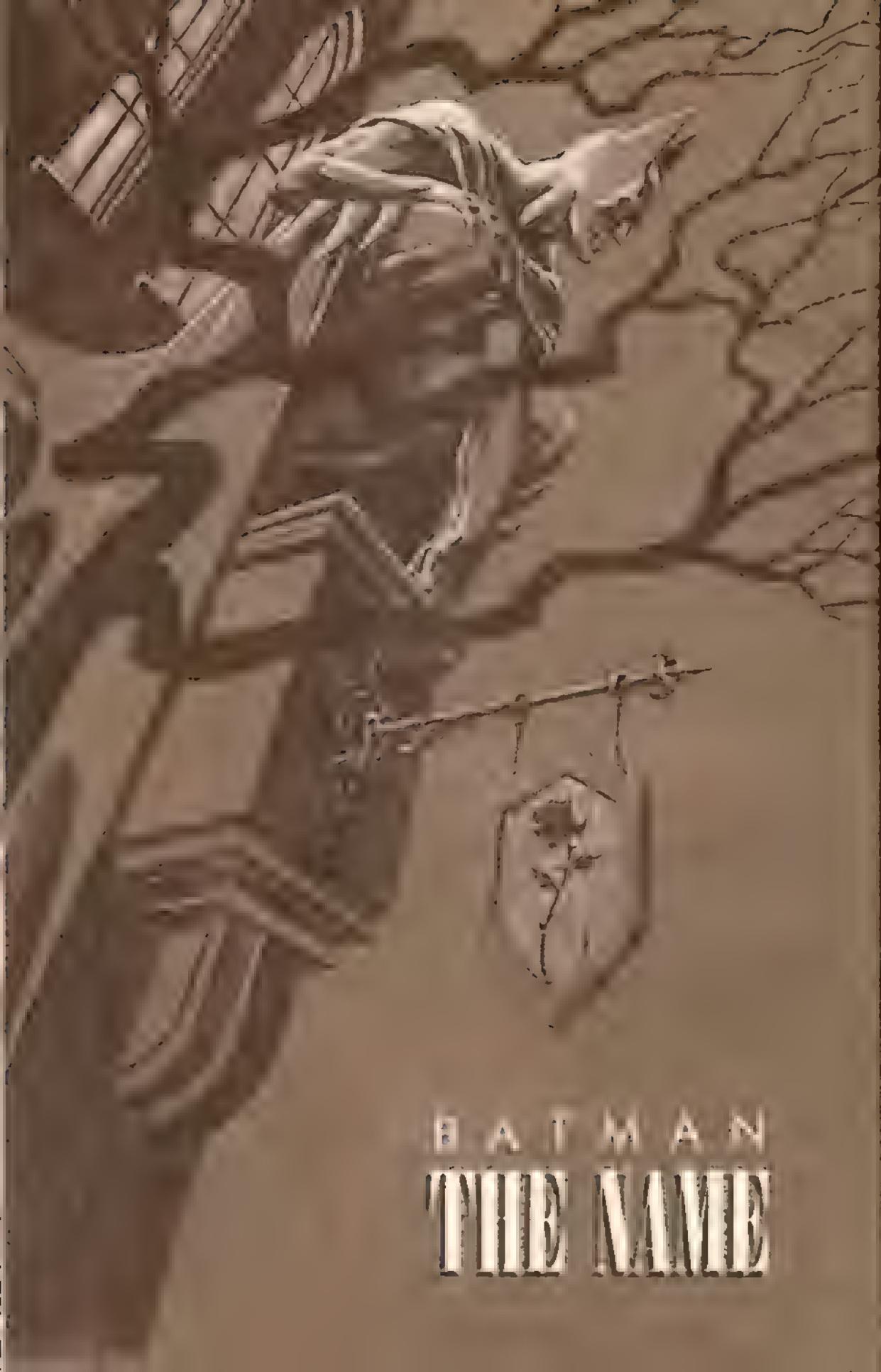
THE DEATH OF CLIFF KETTER'S FRIEND HAS BEEN AVENGED. HE EVEN GOT SOME NEW SHOES IN THE BARGAIN.



**BUT NOW HE'S MORE
CURIOUS THAN EVER
ABOUT THE MAN WHO
HELPED HIM.**



THE LONE, SILENT MAN KNOWN ONLY AS MIDNIGHT.



B A I M A N
WILD WINE

If they had attacked him, or if he had been wearing the mask and costume, he would have had no problem dealing with the three hulks who leapt at him and Alfred from the

tasks. As it was, he had already been there, and would look like a fool if he said he had only to do the easy tasks. But he was not the trigger. Alfred was. And the gun Alfred took him after his tasks was an easy one. He'd have. He was the trigger, the first trigger. Heimer is what he is. Hand-strike and paralytic, he's out with a head full of self-pity, but the mind has a way over his last car, and then came a second time, and a third and fourth. Realizing that he could not make himself less, he let it be.

Bruce relaxed, let himself crumple to the grass, slide into emptiness and let his last master pass, leaving him alone.

Now he was alone. He could not be reached here and now, at only 53 seconds. He had to leave. A car was starting, behind the house. He ran. But it was too late. He could see shape of the vehicle leaving the manor towards his rear, and he knew he had to reach the driveway. He glanced at the ground, visible to the now

front of the study. He had to run to the porch. The asphalt evenly distanced him from the edge of the driveway.

He had a look, perhaps a very, very long look, at his face and at the damage to his skull, and then he had to run, the first burst of consciousness. He had to run, but, and that was the problem, as he was

security code into the mansion's electronic locking system and laying his handprint onto the sensor plate, he was already focusing into the pain, getting inside it and occupying the center so it would have nothing to cling to.

In the foyer, he checked the dozen concealed telltales. No one had actually entered the house. His assailants had simply waited in the bushes. Sometimes the crude methods worked best, precisely because they were crude. He went to the

central clock, set the hands at 10:47—the time I used to see set in those many years past—pulled the cover off the hand and stepped back to allow the old clock to strike twelve, revealing the hidden doorway and the long set of stone steps down to the cave.

He was covered in ways, and that was good. The darkness had been here in the massive cavern, and nothing in this environment helped him to remember that. He stepped the ecosystem to the communication device and the one number. No a microphone and a wire, a connection was made.

A voice came over speaker. "Cawthen residence." "Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Wayne. I was at the reception tonight."

"Yes, sir. Fred, on the line?"

"Yes, sir. Who is it speaking to?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes. The chauffeur."

"Yes, sir."

"No, sir. After all, I didn't call the garage, did I? We'll be in touch. I want to speak with your boss. The Dr. Andrew Cawthen, if you happen to have any news."

"I'm afraid Dr. Cawthen has begun his task, Mr. Wayne."

"My, my, he is dedicated. Now, let me see if I remember. He's going to figure out the code of the Grec. Oh, dear—"

"The Black Rose, sir."

"Yes, yes, of course. He's going to decode this old document and he won't eat until he's done. That is, Jacobs."

"Close, sir. He won't leave the study until he has the document deciphered. If I can get him to do his task within 72 hours, he will donate four million dollars to Dr. Cawthen's favorite charity."

"That's a very welcome, Jacobs, but it is vitally important that I speak to him."

"Impossible, sir."

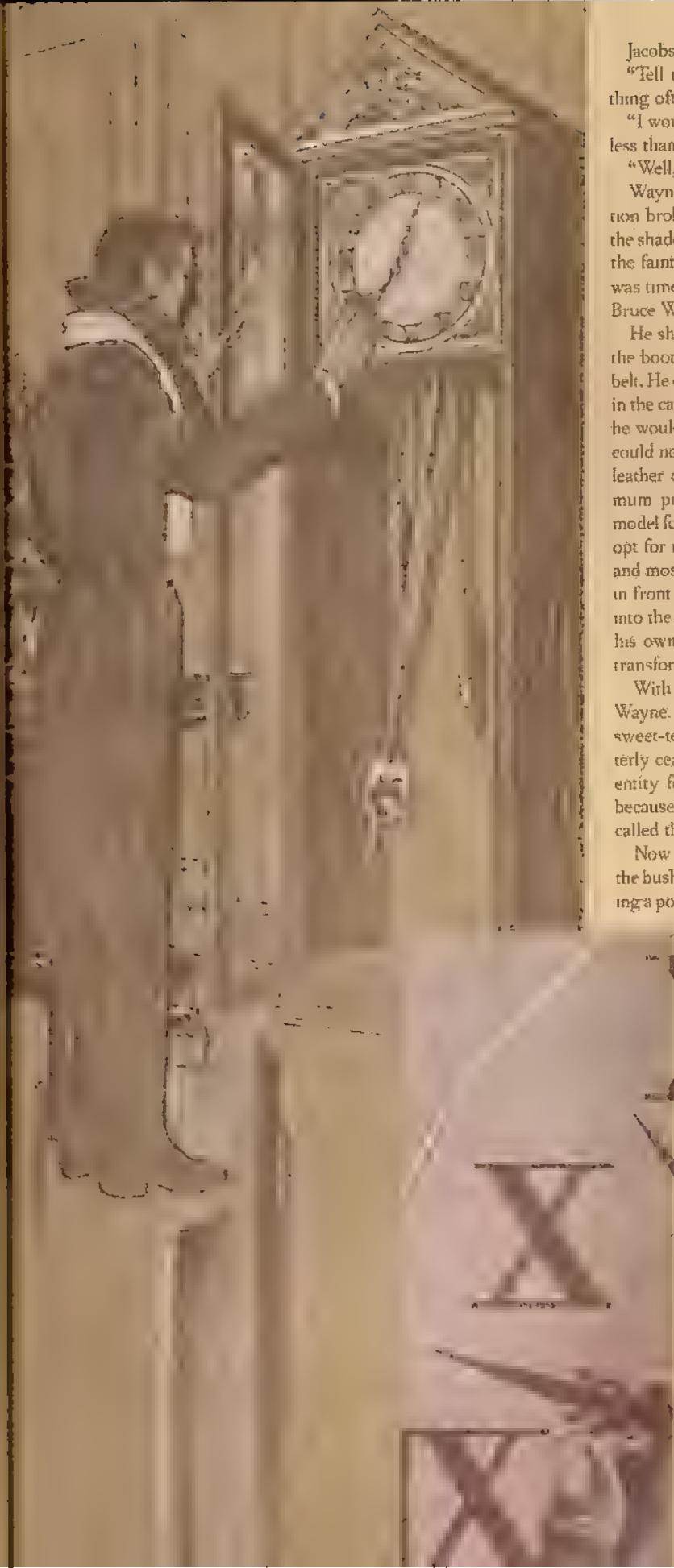
"Can't you even put a phone call through?"

"The study telephone has been removed."

"Yell through the door?"

"Soundproof?"

"I suppose a carrier pigeon is out of the question."



Jacobs forced a chuckle.

"Tell me, does Dr. Cawthen do this sort of thing often?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. I've been in his employ less than a month. Is that all, Mr. Wayne?"

"Well, it *has* to be, I suppose."

Wayne snapped his fingers and the connection broke. For a moment, he stood staring at the shadowed roof of the cavern and listening to the faint *chirring* of the bats who lived there. It was time to act—and it was time to stop being Bruce Wayne.

He shed his tuxedo. He pulled on the tights, the boots, the skin-tight tunic. He buckled the belt. He considered the capes hanging in a niche in the cave wall. He didn't know yet what action he would be taking before morning, and so he could not decide if he should choose the heavy leather cape with the kevlar panels for maximum protection or the featherweight nylon model for maximum movement. When in doubt, opt for mobility. He put on the nylon. Finally, and most important of all, the mask. He held it in front of his face for nearly a minute, staring into the empty eyeholes: a ritual, he realized—his own, intensely private preparation for the transformation.

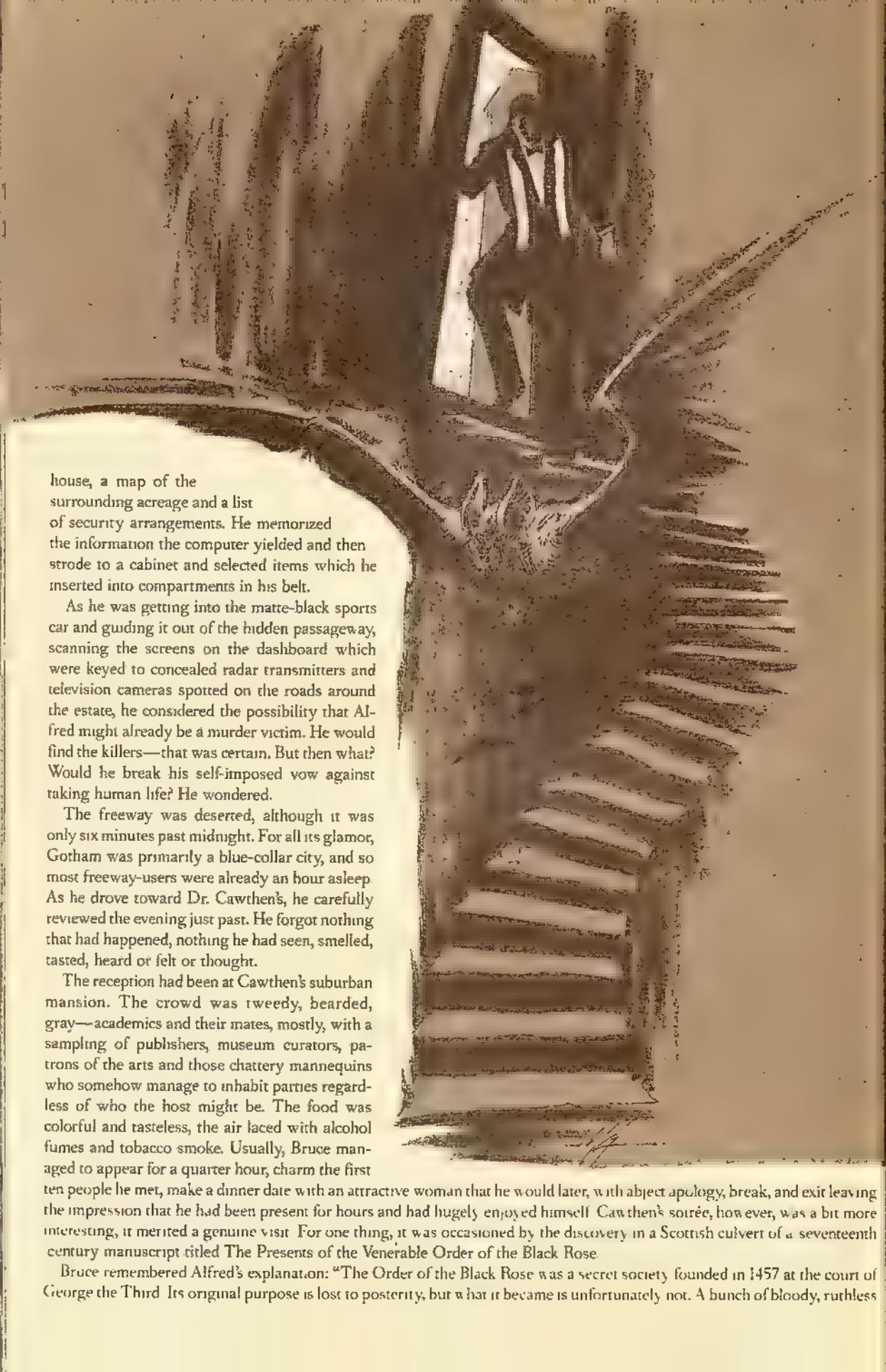
With the mask in place, there was no Bruce Wayne. The handsome, unfocused, funny and sweet-tempered millionaire suddenly and utterly ceased to be. In his place, there was—an entity for which no name existed, really. But because it had to be called something, it was called the Batman.

Now it was moving outside the mansion to the bushes where the attackers had waited, playing a powerful flashlight over the ground, drop-

ping bits of greenery into a plastic evidence bag, reading the signs, the crushed grass, the tracks in the snow, the damp soil. Three of them. Waited less than fifteen minutes. Two were large men, over two hundred pounds, over six feet tall, and the third was smaller—five-ten, one sixty. He knew all this, of course; he had *seen* the attackers. But he would not assume his knowledge was accurate until it was confirmed.

Back in the cave, he dropped the plastic bag onto a lab table. He could run tests and analyses, and almost certainly they would provide information, but they would take time and that made them a last resort. He might not *have* time.

He went to the work station of the computer bank and accessed the Cawthen file. He was particularly interested in the floor plan of Cawthen's



house, a map of the surrounding acreage and a list of security arrangements. He memorized the information the computer yielded and then strode to a cabinet and selected items which he inserted into compartments in his belt.

As he was getting into the matte-black sports car and guiding it out of the hidden passageway, scanning the screens on the dashboard which were keyed to concealed radar transmitters and television cameras spotted on the roads around the estate, he considered the possibility that Alfred might already be a murder victim. He would find the killers—that was certain. But then what? Would he break his self-imposed vow against taking human life? He wondered.

The freeway was deserted, although it was only six minutes past midnight. For all its glamor, Gotham was primarily a blue-collar city, and so most freeway-users were already an hour asleep. As he drove toward Dr. Cawthen's, he carefully reviewed the evening just past. He forgot nothing that had happened, nothing he had seen, smelled, tasted, heard or felt or thought.

The reception had been at Cawthen's suburban mansion. The crowd was tweedy, bearded, gray—academics and their mates, mostly, with a sampling of publishers, museum curators, patrons of the arts and those chattery mannequins who somehow manage to inhabit parties regardless of who the host might be. The food was colorful and tasteless, the air laced with alcohol fumes and tobacco smoke. Usually, Bruce managed to appear for a quarter hour, charm the first ten people he met, make a dinner date with an attractive woman that he would later, with abject apology, break, and exit leaving the impression that he had been present for hours and had hugely enjoyed himself. Cawthen's soirée, however, was a bit more interesting, it merited a genuine visit. For one thing, it was occasioned by the discovery in a Scottish culvert of a seventeenth century manuscript titled *The Presents of the Venerable Order of the Black Rose*.

Bruce remembered Alfred's explanation: "The Order of the Black Rose was a secret society founded in 1457 at the court of George the Third. Its original purpose is lost to posterity, but what it became is unfortunately not. A bunch of bloody, ruthless

۲۱۱۸

using patriotism as an excuse for dispatching enemies. Horrible.

Imagine a combination of Hitler's SS, the hooded gentlemen of the burning crosses and a band of close. They were finally disbanded after and exposed them. The name of the

"Fascinating, Alfred," Bruce said. "But what has this to do with us?"

"Unfortunately, one of my ancestors, Alphonse Penhave been Alphonse who betrayed his fellows. At least, he pardoned."

"I've never been able to decide. Historians can't agree about who did not realize the Order's real purposes. The other half say on the Order, he put an end to the Order's wickedness. But he did it

1. *Leucanthemum vulgare* L. (L.)
2. *Yarrow* (Achillea millefolium)
3. *Wormwood* (Artemesia annua)
4. *Common mugwort* (Artemesia vulgaris)

These cases are not to be considered as
presenting any new idea.

mon street muggers and you would be one of their number went to the chancel-never discovered."

nyworth, was a member. In fact, it may be only one of two members who were. Would that make him a hero or a villain?" you see. Half consider him a fool, a dupe, a shrewd and self-serving. If he informed on committing the most heinous of crimes, be-



"I had my people research him," the speaker continued. "Strange old duck. Eccentric, secretive. He knows stuff from a letter that was accidentally destroyed a couple of years ago. Never told anyone what it is, never wrote it down. Apparently, it's necessary to understand this code."

"Have we met?" Bruce asked

"Name's Maxwellian. Randall Maxwellian. And you're Wayne—see your picture in the paper now and then. I've often thought I could do you some good—image-wise, I mean.

Alfred Pennyworth."

"Nice to meet you. This"—Bruce nodded to Alfred—"is my friend

"Not friend," Alfred told Maxwellian. "Butler. I am Master Wayne's butler."

"The other descendant! Well, what are you betting, Pennyworth? Who did it, your ancestor or mine?"

"I reserve my opinion

"Me, I think old Aldebert Maxwellian was the whistle-blower. I had my people research this and frankly, Alphonse Pennyworth seems like a weak sister. Spineless type."

Bruce saw Alfred stiffen. *So Alfred has family pride. In all these years, I never suspected*

"Are you a cattleman?" Bruce asked.

"Why do you think that? Oh, the clothes. No, I'm an image consultant. Opened a branch in Fort Worth a couple of weeks ago and decided I should go native."

"The Texas businessmen I've met tend to blue flannel," Alfred said.

"Maybe you've only met the dull ones."

"Or those with taste."

"Listen, you skinny—"

Bruce stepped between Alfred and Randall Maxwellian. "It's been a pleasure, Mr. Maxwellian. there's a young

Now, if you'll excuse us,
lady I've promised to meet in
the city."

Alfred insisted on driving home—

"Appearances must be maintained," he said when Bruce protested—and so Bruce allowed himself to sink into the leather upholstery of the limousine. For a while, he watched large, flat snowflakes flare in the limo's headlights, savoring the quiet. The snow shower was brief, however, over in five minutes. As Alfred drove through the estate's huge iron gate, he said, "I suppose the break in the weather means you'll be leaving again—not that a little thing like a storm ever inhibits your nocturnal activity."

"Not tonight, Alfred. I really haven't had much sleep in the past four days—"

"Ah, yes. The contretemps with the Penguin."

"Yes. And since our friend Mr. Cobblepot is reestablished in the Gotham House of Detention, I think I'll give myself a night off. Maybe read a couple of books and turn in early."

Bad prophecy. Now, three hours later, he was returning to Cawthen's with only 53 seconds' rest. He realized that Alfred's abduction might have nothing to do with Cawthen, but that



was unlikely and, lacking anyplace else to begin, he would question the old scholar. He parked the car in the shadows alongside the high stone wall that surrounded Cawthen's estate, set its alarms, and, after a moment's concentration, bounded from the top of the car to the top of the wall and over. He landed lightly, his fingers already removing a thin aerosol container from his belt. The two German shepherds bounded around the corner of the house. When they were about six feet away, the Batman pressed the top of the aerosol and the dogs stopped, relaxed, whimpered and collapsed onto the grass. They would be unconscious for approximately two hours.

The Batman glided to the house and looked up at a single rectangle of light high in a tower, five stories above the ground. If he tried to reach it from inside, he would have to deal with a battery of burglar alarms, a butler, a chauffeur, a secretary and a hired security guard. This he could do with no uncommon effort, but it would take time and that was exactly what he might not have.

He pulled off a glove and felt the masonry of the wall with his bare fingers. No problem. He removed his other glove, folded it with its mate and tucked both under his belt. Then he reached up, hooked his fingers into a space between the stones, and began climbing.

Exactly four minutes later, he was perched on a sill peering through a window into Anders Cawthen's study. Light came from a single circular fluorescent bulb in a reflector above a desk in the center of the room. The old man was hunched over a computer keyboard, his gaze swiveling from a sheet of parchment on the desk to the computer screen. As the Batman watched, he pressed a key and peered intently at the screen for a moment before returning his attention to the parchment.

The window opened easily and the Batman slipped into the room. Cawthen's head jerked around and he gasped.

"Please don't be alarmed, Doctor," the Batman said pleasantly. "I won't keep

you long."

"Who are you?" the old man rasped.

"I'm afraid not."

"Call me the Batman. I'd like to ask you a question, if I may."

"Someone is pay-

"I can't stop you, can I?"

"Not paying me

Society—"

"Then do it quickly and get out."

ing you a large sum to decode the Presents—"

I'll probably be dead before the check gets written. Paying the Gotham Birdwatching

"Who is offering the money?"

"None of your business."

The Batman knelt by an electrical outlet and fingered a length of wire that ran from it to the computer. He looked up at Cawthen and smiled. "I understand that when the power to a computer is interrupted, whatever's in the machine is lost. Hours of labor sometimes. Is that correct, Doctor?"

"You wouldn't dare."

The Batman tugged at the wire. "I will do anything I must. Absolutely anything."

"No, no," Cawthen gasped, and coughed for almost a minute. When he had regained his breath, he said, "It's Haliburt. Acton Haliburt."

"Sir Acton Haliburt? The British industrialist?"

"Yes, yes. Now I've given you the name. Get out!"

"In a moment. Why is this translation so important to him?"

"Because the name of the man who betrayed the Order of the Black Rose is in it."

"And do you have any idea what that name might be?"

"One of two. Either Alphonse Pennyworth or Aldebert Maxwellian."

"Why does Haliburt care about the name?"

"How the devil should I know?"

"Guess, or—." The Batman curled the wire around his forefinger.

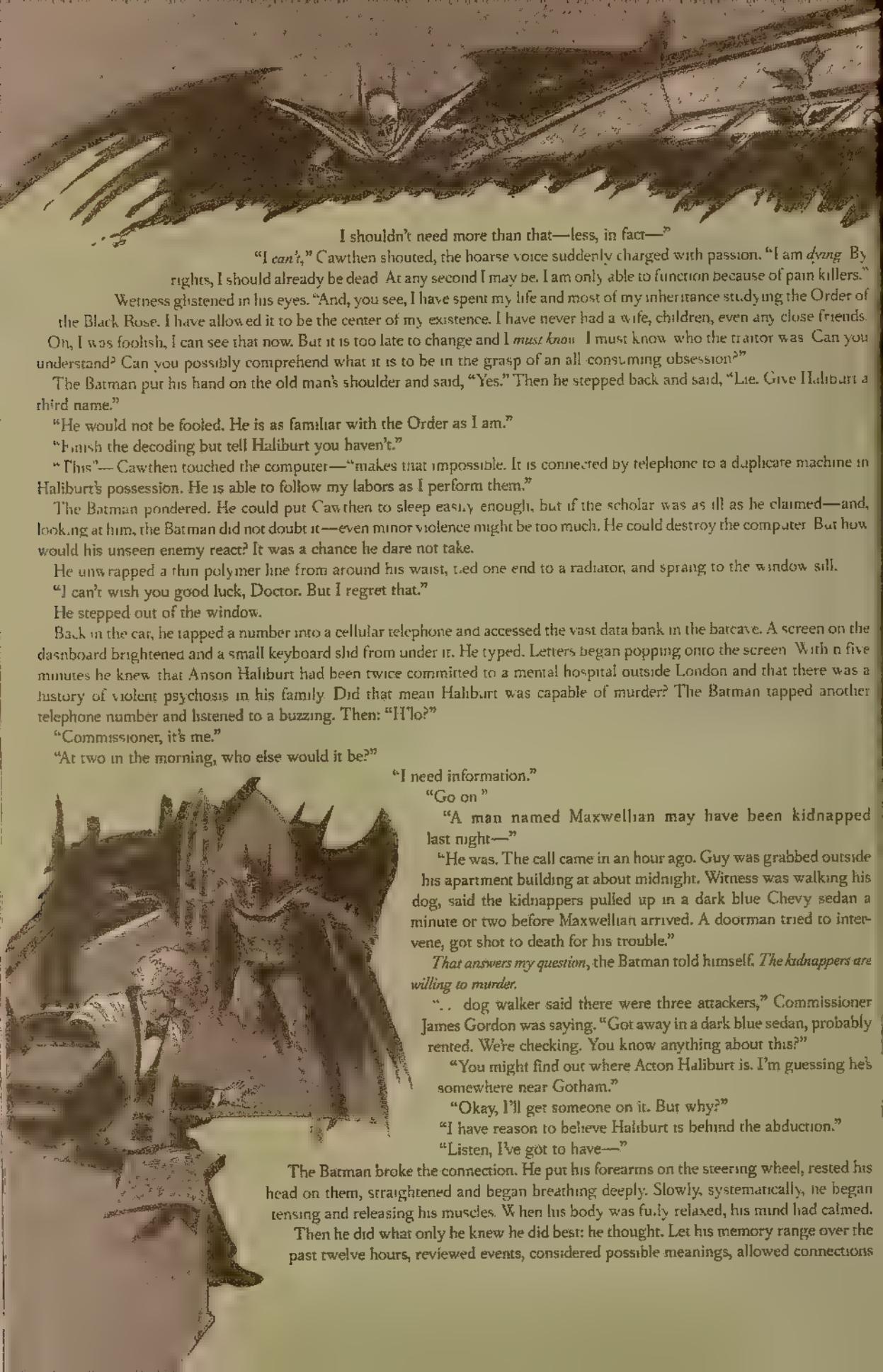
"The Royal Court sent one of Haliburt's ancestors to the gallows at the Tower of London. As the noose was being put around his neck, he made his sons swear vengeance. Each succeeding generation of male Haliburts have renewed the vow. I suppose that includes Acton Haliburt."

"So he wants to make good on a promise that's hundreds of years old?"

"I suppose."

The Batman let the wire drop to the floor and stood. "Doctor, a man's life may be in danger. You've got to delay completing your translation at least a day or two.





I shouldn't need more than that—less, in fact—”

“I can’t,” Cawthen shouted, the hoarse voice suddenly charged with passion. “I am dying. By

rights, I should already be dead. At any second I may be. I am only able to function because of pain killers.”

Wetness glistened in his eyes. “And, you see, I have spent my life and most of my inheritance studying the Order of the Black Rose. I have allowed it to be the center of my existence. I have never had a wife, children, even any close friends. On, I was foolish, I can see that now. But it is too late to change and I must know. I must know who the traitor was. Can you understand? Can you possibly comprehend what it is to be in the grasp of an all consuming obsession?”

The Batman put his hand on the old man’s shoulder and said, “Yes.” Then he stepped back and said, “Lie. Give Haliburt a third name.”

“He would not be fooled. He is as familiar with the Order as I am.”

“Finish the decoding but tell Haliburt you haven’t.”

“This”— Cawthen touched the computer—“makes that impossible. It is connected by telephone to a duplicate machine in Haliburt’s possession. He is able to follow my labors as I perform them.”

The Batman pondered. He could put Cawthen to sleep easily enough, but if the scholar was as ill as he claimed—and, looking at him, the Batman did not doubt it—even minor violence might be too much. He could destroy the computer. But how would his unseen enemy react? It was a chance he dare not take.

He unwrapped a thin polymer line from around his waist, tied one end to a radiator, and sprang to the window sill.

“I can’t wish you good luck, Doctor. But I regret that.”

He stepped out of the window.

Back in the car, he tapped a number into a cellular telephone and accessed the vast data bank in the batcave. A screen on the dashboard brightened and a small keyboard slid from under it. He typed. Letters began popping onto the screen. Within five minutes he knew that Anson Haliburt had been twice committed to a mental hospital outside London and that there was a history of violent psychosis in his family. Did that mean Haliburt was capable of murder? The Batman tapped another telephone number and listened to a buzzing. Then: “Hello?”

“Commissioner, it’s me.”

“At two in the morning, who else would it be?”

“I need information.”

“Go on.”

“A man named Maxwellian may have been kidnapped last night—”

“He was. The call came in an hour ago. Guy was grabbed outside his apartment building at about midnight. Witness was walking his dog, said the kidnappers pulled up in a dark blue Chevy sedan, probably rented. A doorman tried to intervene, got shot to death for his trouble.”

That answers my question, the Batman told himself. *The kidnappers are willing to murder.*

“... dog walker said there were three attackers,” Commissioner James Gordon was saying. “Got away in a dark blue sedan, probably rented. We’re checking. You know anything about this?”

“You might find out where Acton Haliburt is. I’m guessing he’s somewhere near Gotham.”

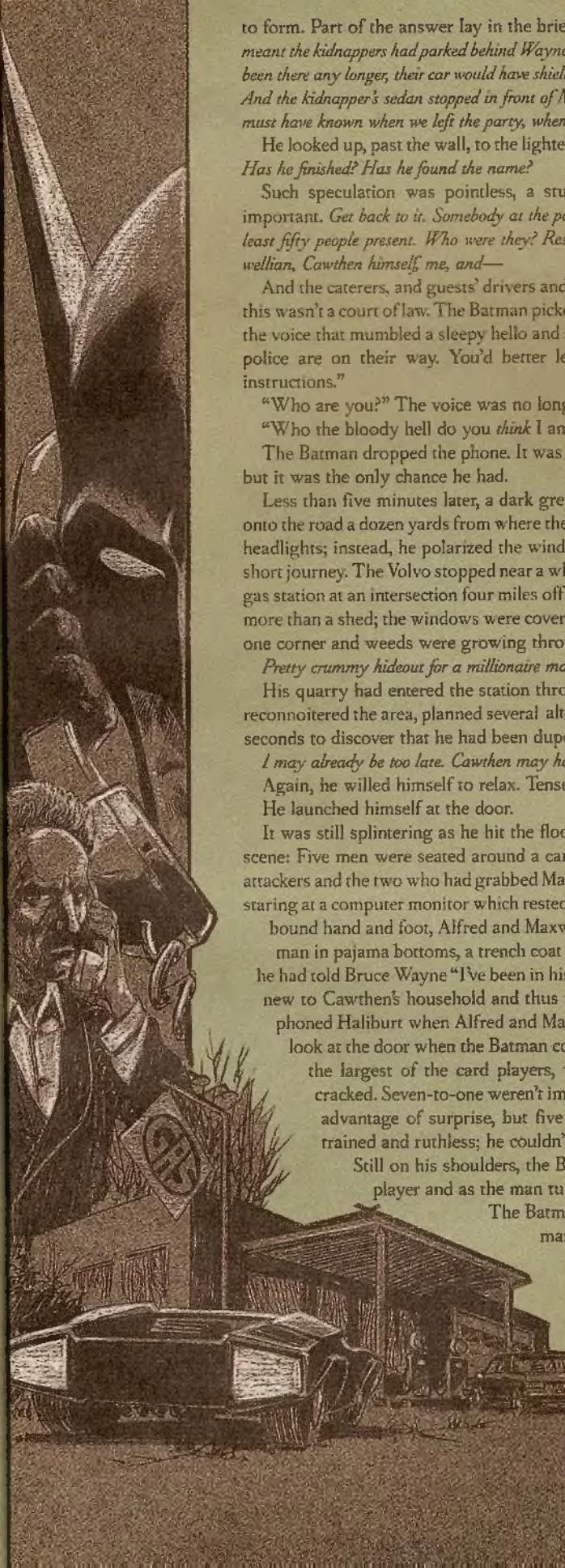
“Okay, I’ll get someone on it. But why?”

“I have reason to believe Haliburt is behind the abduction.”

“Listen, I’ve got to have—”

The Batman broke the connection. He put his forearms on the steering wheel, rested his head on them, straightened and began breathing deeply. Slowly, systematically, he began tensing and releasing his muscles. When his body was fully relaxed, his mind had calmed.

Then he did what only he knew he did best: he thought. Let his memory range over the past twelve hours, reviewed events, considered possible meanings, allowed connections



to form. Part of the answer lay in the brief storm, of course: *No dry spots on the asphalt. Which meant the kidnappers had parked behind Wayne Manor only a short time before we were attacked. If they'd been there any longer, their car would have shielded the ground and I would have seen its shape in the snow. And the kidnapper's sedan stopped in front of Maxwellian's building very shortly before he arrived. They must have known when we left the party, when Maxwellian left—*

He looked up, past the wall, to the lighted window in the tower. *How are Cawthen's labors going? Has he finished? Has he found the name?*

Such speculation was pointless, a stupid distraction. His own labor was all that was important. *Get back to it. Somebody at the party must have informed the kidnappers. But there were at least fifty people present. Who were they? Respected academics, their wives, their lovers, Alfred, Maxwellian, Cawthen himself, me, and—*

And the caterers, and guests' drivers and one other. No proof that he was Haliburt's man, but this wasn't a court of law. The Batman picked up his phone, tapped a number, waited, recognized the voice that mumbled a sleepy hello and said, "Listen, it's gone sour. No time to explain—the police are on their way. You'd better leave immediately. Go to Haliburt. He'll give you instructions."

"Who are you?" The voice was no longer sleepy.

"Who the bloody hell do you think I am? Get moving."

The Batman dropped the phone. It was pure bluff, and there were a dozen ways it could fail, but it was the only chance he had.

Less than five minutes later, a dark green Volvo sped from Cawthen's property and turned onto the road a dozen yards from where the Batman waited. The Batman followed, not using his headlights; instead, he polarized the windshield and switched on the infrared beams. It was a short journey. The Volvo stopped near a white Pontiac and a dark blue Chevrolet near a deserted gas station at an intersection four miles off the newly-built freeway. The building was not much more than a shed; the windows were covered with slabs of plywood, an ancient sign hung from one corner and weeds were growing through cracks in the concrete driveway.

Pretty crummy hideout for a millionaire madman.

His quarry had entered the station through a side door. Normally, the Batman would have reconnoitered the area, planned several alternative attacks, but it would take the man only seconds to discover that he had been duped, seconds more to recover, and then—?

I may already be too late. Cawthen may have found his answer while I was driving here.

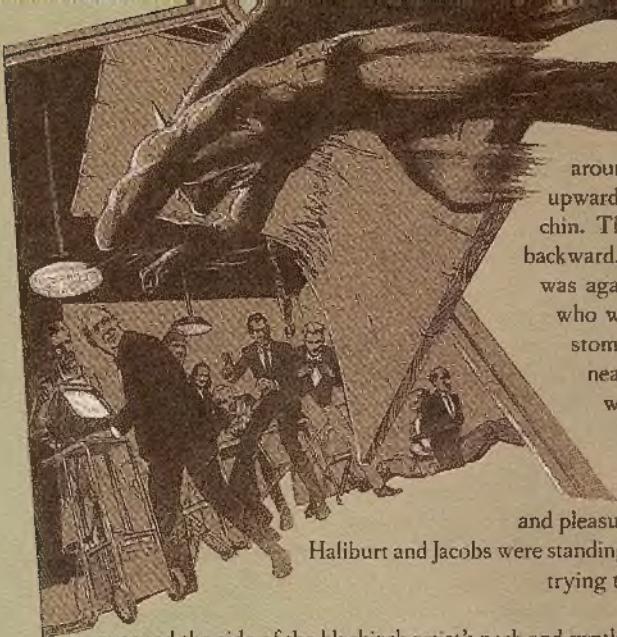
Again, he willed himself to relax. Tense, he would be more likely to make a mistake.

He launched himself at the door.

It was still splintering as he hit the floor inside and rolled, and as he did, he registered the scene: Five men were seated around a card table littered with ashtrays and bottles (his three attackers and the two who had grabbed Maxwellian); a fat man in a brown suit (surely Haliburt) staring at a computer monitor which rested atop an old battery cart; and, on the floor in a corner, bound hand and foot, Alfred and Maxwellian (alive). And, standing next to Haliburt, a thin man in pajama bottoms, a trench coat and house slippers (Jacobs, the secretary who, when he had told Bruce Wayne "I've been in his employ less than a month" had revealed that he was new to Cawthen's household and thus was probably Haliburt's pawn, the person who had phoned Haliburt when Alfred and Maxwellian left the party). All of them were turning to look at the door when the Batman completed his roll and planted both feet in the chest of the largest of the card players, who was half-standing, reaching for his hip. Ribs cracked. Seven-to-one weren't impossible odds, particularly when the Batman had the advantage of surprise, but five of his opponents were competent thugs, probably trained and ruthless; he couldn't afford restraint.

Still on his shoulders, the Batman booted the chair from under the second card player and as the man tumbled, kicked him precisely under the jaw.

The Batman arched his body and sprang to his feet. The third man, whose right arm was in a sling, and the fourth had revolvers almost clear of shoulder holsters. The Batman shoved the table into their bellies and, as they gasped and bent over, swept the table in a wide arc behind him; its edge struck the fifth man in the chin as he was aiming a Glock automatic at the Batman's head. The gun fired high, the slug passing



well over its target, and the Batman let the momentum of the table spin him

around, his fist moving out and slightly upward to meet the point of the gunman's chin. The man's head snapped and he fell backward. Before he hit the floor, the Batman was again facing the third and fourth men, who were still gasping and clutching their stomachs. The Batman recognized the nearer of the pair as the blackjack artist who had pounded his skull. It was a moment he occasionally experienced, a moment when adrenalin surged and the need for revenge was hot and pleasurable. Three of them were down. Haliburt and Jacobs were standing by the monitor, unarmed, staring, trying to comprehend what was happening.

Now he could afford restraint.

grasped the side of the blackjack artist's neck and gently pinched. A painless judo technique, and crumpled.

The Batman could never allow himself to experience any satisfaction whatever from violence—not without the terrible risk of becoming what he despised.

"I give up." That was from the man with the broken arm, still clutching himself, backing away from the Batman.

"Very wise." The Batman produced handcuffs from under his cape and tossed them to the kidnapper. "Put these on and wait for the police."

The Batman did not wait to see if he was obeyed.

He turned. Jacobs was staring at him, Haliburt at the monitor.

"He's doing it," Haliburt whispered. "He's broken the code and he's getting the *name*."

Haliburt would be arrested, would perhaps be held by the authorities. But he was rich, and the wealthy had resources; bail would be set, bonds paid, vastly competent attorneys enlisted. Even if he were imprisoned, he could maintain his vendetta—

On the screen, the letters were appearing slowly, as though the person typing them were taking enormous care:

TRAITOR'S NAME IS AL

The Batman put the sole of his boot against the battery cart and straightened his leg. The cart bumped a few feet across the floor, hit a crack in the concrete and tipped—

"No!" Haliburt shrieked, raising his bulk from the chair.

The Batman shoved him back.

And the monitor toppled and hit the floor and exploded. The lights flickered. Haliburt stared at the litter that had been the computer.

"I'll get the name—I will," he mumbled.

"Perhaps," the Batman replied.

He knelt by the prisoners and a few seconds later they were free.

"Lissen, fella, I've got to thank you." Maxwellian said, rubbing his wrists.

"Don't bother," the Batman said.

He stepped to the door and faded into the darkness.

"—according to the morning newscast, poor old Cawthen was found sprawled on the floor by his computer," Alfred was saying as he stirred waffle batter the next day. "They say the machine was shut off."

"Uh huh," Bruce said over the rim of his orange juice glass.

"I wonder how he felt, those last few seconds."

"I imagine he died happy—at least, he had a smile on his face."

"Master Bruce, how could you possibly . . . oh, certainly. You were there."

"Someone had to turn off Cawthen's computer."

"Then you saw the name."

Bruce was silent.

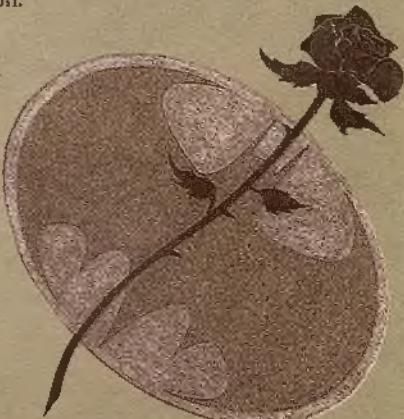
"But you won't tell me what it was."

"Only if you really want me to. Do you?"

"Some day, perhaps. When I have finally decided."

"Decided what, Alfred?"

"Which is worse, ignorance or malice."



MS. TREE

DC COMICS INC.
665 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10103

JENETTE KAHN, President & Editor-In-Chief
DICK GIORDANO, VP-Editorial Director
MIKE GOLD, Editor
KATIE MAIN, Development Associate
RICHARD BRUNING, Design Director
TERRI CUNNINGHAM, Managing Editor
BOB ROZAKIS, Production Director
PAUL LEVITZ, Executive VP & Publisher
JOE ORLANDO, VP-Creative Director
BRUCE BRISTOW, VP-Sales & Marketing
MATTHEW RAGONE, Circulation Director
TOM BALLEO, Advertising Director
PATRICK CALDON, VP & Controller

On the road back to our roots, somebody took a left turn.

Back in the very early 1930s, there were no comic book stores. In fact, there were no comic books *per se* — a few reprint collections of popular newspaper strips, but they weren't in any sort of magazine form, and they weren't published periodically.

However, there were the heroic character pulps. The Shadow, Doc Savage, The Spider... the list goes on and on. These magazines contained a long prose story (with illustrations) featuring the cover-named character and his inevitable cohorts. Each issue was rounded out by a couple of back-up stories that maintained the lead feature's tone.

The pulps were these massive suckers, made thick not really by the page count but by the pulpwood paper they used. To paraphrase Bill Cosby, you could actually see the chunks of wood floating in the paper.

Despite their enormous influence on pop culture, they really didn't last all that long. However, as it often has been pointed out — most eloquently by Jim Steranko in the first volume of his *History of Comics* — there is a direct connection between the hero pulps and comics. They were so successful that, when the comics publishers that started up in the mid-1930s (many of whom were printing pulps as well) ran out of newspaper strip material to reprint, they took their lead from the hero pulps. Quite literally, the hero pulps gave birth to the hero comics.

In the ensuing five decades, the hero pulps evolved into the hero paperbacks (the likes of Doc Savage, The Spider, and Operator 5 gave way to the likes of Mike Hammer, James Bond, and Matt Helm), and the anthology comic gave way to the one-feature comic.

What you're holding is *something* of a return to our roots: a magazine cover featuring an extremely hard-boiled hero who dominates the page count, backed by two short stories.

Of course, we're keeping the comics format. Mostly.

MS. TREE QUARTERLY is indeed a comic book, but one that takes much of its influence from the old heroic character pulps.

successful ongoing feature to be produced in the 1980s — DC and Marvel included — to make it to the 1990s. She got her start in the old *Eclipse Monthly*, and went on to star in 50 issues of her own comic book.

The creation of Max Allan Collins and Terry Beatty, Ms. Tree clearly wears her influences on her sleeve: the hardboiled private eyes, with a touch of Mickey Spillane and a dash of *Dragnet*. Well, maybe more than just a touch and a dash. Unrelenting, undaunting and extremely compelling, Ms. Tree has been the most enduring leading private detective in the history of comic books. Only DETECTIVE COMICS' Slam Bradley — a back-up feature — survived longer... and Ms. Tree's breathing down his neck.

At the time of her creation, Beatty was well known for his work as a cartoonist and columnist for the *Comics Buyer's Guide*. And by that point, Collins had about a dozen or so mysteries and thrillers under his belt — not to mention several years of writing *Dick Tracy* for the newspapers. Since creating this feature, Collins and Beatty managed to find time to create WILD DOG for DC; Max has written about a million more novels, including the award-winning Nate Heller series. (Don't worry, we'll be plugging Max's upcoming novels as they come out — right now, his adaptation of the *Dick Tracy* movie is about to hit the stores, and his fourth Nate Heller novel, *Neon Mirage*, will be out in paperback this coming winter; a new Heller novel has been completed and will be appearing in hardcover at about that same time).

I don't want to give Ms. Tree short shrift, but her nearly ten years of publication speaks for itself. Instead, I want to spend a bit of our precious space talking about our other two features.

Midnight was created by Jack Cole (of Plastic Man fame) for the old Quality line of comics, under direct orders of his publisher and editor. Let's face it: the original Midnight was meant to imitate Will Eisner's The Spirit — a classic even then. Quality was reprinting The Spirit, and they were concerned that the feature might be undermined (I'm being polite) by Eisner's being drafted into that little brouhaha we call World War II. Cole was far too creative to do an imitation of anything, and Midnight was quite an entertaining feature, even if the hero did look like The Spirit.

In recreating Midnight, we wanted to take the character as far away from The Spirit as

possible while preserving the more unusual, highly pulp-oriented aspects of the feature. Max Collins recommended his friend, the award-winning mystery and western novelist Ed Gorman — Ed's also the editor of *Mystery Scene* magazine and of my absolute all-time favorite mystery collections, *The Black Lizard Anthologies of Crime Fiction*. Most recently, Ed teamed up with Bob Randisi to edit *Under the Gun*, another first-rate mystery anthology (all three books, by the way, include Max Collins stories).

If all you've seen from artist Graham Nolan is his work on *POWER OF THE ATOM* or the brand-new, just released *HAWKWORLD* monthly (in which he inks his own stuff), then you probably missed his more pulp-oriented work for *Eclipse Comics*. Not to worry; a quick look at this story and you'll see why he was my first and only choice to draw *Midnight*.

* * * * *

Our Illustrated Story segment is an attempt to turn the tables on history: since MS. TREE QUARTERLY takes its influence from the old heroic character pulps, it was only fair to round out each issue with an illustrated pulp-like story, featuring stories about comic characters in prose form.

We are starting off with Batman, written by Denny O'Neil and illustrated by Mike Grell, for the following reasons: 1) Denny's quite the prose writer, and it's nice to see him exercise that part of his brain once again; 2) Mike's quite the illustrator, something about which most comic fans are unaware; and 3) hey, this is the first issue of an uncostumed female hero comic book, and this story's starring Batman, and we ain't stupid. We're going to give MS. TREE every chance we can.

Upcoming stories will be featuring The Butcher, the Dead Detective, Inspector Henderson, Omac in the 20th Century, and Wild Dog. Our creative teams will include Mike Baron and Shea Anton Pensa, John Ostrander and William Messner-Loebs, Jerry Ordway and Jerry Ordway, John Byrne and John Byrne, and Max Collins and Denys Cowan. Mix and match. (Oh, so why isn't Terry Beatty illustrating Wild Dog? Hey, do you have any idea how long it takes a person to pencil and ink 48 pages? Well, most artists take slightly longer than three months... which poses a problem if you're doing a book called MS. TREE QUARTERLY.)

The talented Dean Motter — of *Mister X* and *THE PRISONER* fame — is our designer on this series, handling the look of

Our lead feature, Ms. Tree, is hardly a new-born babe. Indeed, she was the first

* * * * *

the words and pictures. An art director's dream... or, perhaps more accurately, an editor's dream and possibly an art director's nightmare. Anyway, Dean makes a valuable and (for the world of comics) unique contribution to our series of Illustrated Stories.

* * * * *

Most comic books need a cover (not all; check out *Weird Organic Tales*), and in keeping with our pulp influences, we've decided to do with cover paintings here on MS. TREE QUARTERLY. Mike Grell kicks off our series, and Mike will be back before too long. Denys Cowan (who's also doing cover paintings on THE QUESTION QUARTERLY) and Scott Hampton are next in line.

* * * * *

Overall, we're real proud of MS. TREE QUARTERLY. It's quite a challenge, and the way everybody's pulling together to make this concept work is quite a sight to behold. My deepest thanks to all involved.

* * * * *

One of the most popular features in the previous series of *Ms. Tree* comics was the scintillating and provocative letter column, written by Max Collins and subtly titled *Swak!*. The editor knows a good thing when he sees it, and the oft-mentioned Mr. Collins will be resuming the *Swak!*

column in our next issue. Therefore, kindly send your letters of comment to

Swak! / Ms. Tree Quarterly
c/o DC Comics Inc.
666 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10103

After I read 'em, I'll be mailing them off to Max. Let me encourage you to comment on both *Midnight* and our Illustrated Story features as well; we need all the feedback we can get.

* * * * *

A very deep and personal thank you to Mickey Spillane for selflessly, freely and quickly giving us the MS. TREE endorsement quote we've been proudly using in our promotion work. Mickey's latest book — indeed, his first *Mike Hammer* novel in two decades — is called *The Killing Man*, and it's like the man never stopped writing the things. If you like MS. TREE and you've never read a *Mike Hammer* novel, you've truly been missing something. Check it out.

* * * * *

One of the regular "features" in each issue of the old *Ms. Tree* series was an ad from my old friends, Robert and Phyllis Weinberg. These folks have been busy selling mystery, pulp, fantasy, and science-fiction stuff for years... they're also co-sponsors of the

annual Chicago Comicon comic art convention, which happens to be my alma mater.

Among the zillions of items they keep in stock just happens to be the complete works of Max Collins — at least, the stuff that's in print. This includes his sundry prose series: *Elliott Ness*, *Nolan*, *Mallory*, *Dick Tracy*, and the king of the Collins canon, the *Nate Heller* series. The Weinbergs also keep Max's critical and nostalgic works in stock, and they stock Ed Gorman's *Black Lizard* anthologies, to boot. They probably have some sort of catalog or something; if you're having a hard time finding any individual Collins or Gorman titles, try dropping them a letter at 15145 Oxford Drive, Oak Forest Illinois 60452, or call 'em at 708-687-5765.

* * * * *

In three months... Ms. Tree takes off against a satanic cult in her typical laid back manner, but peculiarly, she gets a lot less than she bargains for. Which doesn't do much to lengthen her expected life span, believe me. Collins and Beatty at the dueling banjos, natch.

Plus... the return of *Midnight*, by Gorman and Nolan (the artist, not the paperback hero), and our second illustrated Story. And a painted cover from Denys Cowan.

Have a nice summer.

— Mike Gold

